

ACROSS THE CAMEROONS

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CAMEROONS ***

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"DOWN," CRIED THE GUIDE, "FOR YOUR LIFE!"

ACROSS THE CAMEROONS

A Story of War and Adventure

BY

CAPTAIN CHARLES GILSON

Author of "A Motor-Scout in Flanders" &c. &c.

Illustrated by Arch. Webb

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Illustrations

'Down," cried the guide, "for your life!". *Frontispiece*

In the moonlight he saw the flash of a knife that missed him by the fraction of an
inch

The leopard rose upon its hind legs, rampant, terrible, and glorious

ACROSS THE CAMEROONS

CHAPTER I--Captain von Hardenberg

Late on a September afternoon, in the year 1913, two boys returned to Friar's Court by way of the woods. Each carried a gun under his arm, and a well-bred Irish water-spaniel followed close upon their heels. They were of about the same age, though it would have been apparent, even to the most casual observer, that they stood to one another in the relation of master to man.

The one, Henry Urquhart, home for his holidays from Eton, was the nephew of Mr. Langton, the retired West African judge, who owned Friar's Court. The other was Jim Braid, the son of Mr. Langton's head-gamekeeper, who had already donned the corduroys and the moleskin waistcoat of his father's trade. Though to some extent a social gap divided them, a friendship had already sprung up between these two which was destined to ripen as the years went on, carrying both to the uttermost parts of the world, through the forests of the Cameroons, across the inhospitable hills west of the Cameroon Peak, even to the great plains of the Sahara.

Harry was a boy of the open air. He was never happier than when on horse-back, or when he carried a shot-gun and a pocketful of cartridges. As for Jim, he was no rider, but there were few boys of his age who could hit a bolting rabbit or a rocketing pheasant with such surety of aim.

The Judge himself was much given to study, and was said to be a recognized authority on the primitive races of Africa and the East. For hours at a time he would shut himself up in the little bungalow he had built in the woods, where, undisturbed, he could carry out his researches. He was fond of his nephew, not the less so because Harry was a boy well able to amuse himself; and where there were rabbits to be shot and ditches to be jumped, young Urquhart was in his element.

In Jim Braid, the schoolboy found one who had kindred tastes, who was a better shot than himself, who could manage ferrets, and who, on one occasion, had even had the privilege of assisting his father in the capture of a poacher. Constant companionship engendered a friendship which in time grew into feelings of mutual admiration. In the young gamekeeper's eyes Harry was all that a gentleman should be; whereas the schoolboy knew that in Jim Braid he had found a companion after his heart.

The path they followed led them past the bungalow. As they drew near they saw there was a light in the window, and within was Mr. Langton, a tall, grey-haired man, who sat at his writing-desk, poring over his books and papers.

"My uncle works too hard," said Harry. "For the last week he has done nothing else. Every morning he has left the house directly after breakfast to come here. I think there's something on his mind; he seldom speaks at meals."

"I suppose," said Braid, "in a big estate like this there must be a good deal of business to be done?"

"I don't think that takes him much time," said the other. "He keeps his accounts and his cashbox in the bungalow, it is true, but he is much more interested in the ancient histories of India and Asia than in Friar's Court. He's a member of the Royal Society, you know, and that's a very great honour."

"He's a fine gentleman!" said Braid, as if that clinched the matter once and for all.

They walked on in silence for some minutes, and presently came to the drive. It was then that they heard the sound of the wheels of a dog-cart driving towards the house.

"That's Captain von Hardenberg," said Braid.

"I expect so," said the other. "His train must have been late. There'll be three of us to shoot to-morrow."

Braid did not answer. Harry glanced at him quickly.

"You don't seem pleased," he said.

"To tell the truth, sir," said Braid, after a brief pause, "I'm not. Captain von

Hardenberg and I don't get on very well together."

"How's that?"

Jim hesitated.

"I hardly like to say, sir," said he, after a pause.

"I don't mind," said Harry. "To tell the truth, my cousin and I have never been friends. I can't think whatever possessed an aunt of mine to marry a German--and a Prussian at that. He's a military attaché, you know, at the German Embassy in London."

The dog-cart came into sight round a bend in the drive. They stepped aside to let it pass. There was just sufficient light to enable them to see clearly the features of the young man who was seated by the side of the coachman. He was about twenty-three years of age, with a very dark and somewhat sallow complexion, sharp, aquiline features, and piercing eyes. Upon his upper lip was a small, black moustache. He wore a heavy ulster, into the pockets of which his hands were thrust.

"Well, sir," said Jim, when the dog-cart had passed, "we've had a good time together, what with shooting and the ferrets, but I'm afraid it's all ended, now that the captain's come."

"Ended!" said Harry. "Why should it be ended?"

"Because I can never be the same with that gentleman as I am with you. Last time he was here he struck me."

"Struck you! What for?"

"There was a shooting-party at the Court," the young gamekeeper went on, "and I was helping my father. A pheasant broke covert midway between Captain von Hardenberg and another gentleman, and they both fired. Both claimed the bird, and appealed to me. I knew the captain had fired first and missed, and I told him so. He said nothing at the time, though he got very red in the face. That evening he came up to me and asked me what I meant by it. I said I had spoken the truth, and he told me not to be insolent. I don't know what I said to that, sir; but, at any rate, he struck me. I clenched my fists, and as near as a touch did I knock him down. I remembered in time that he was the Judge's nephew, the same as yourself, and I'd lose my place if I did it. So I just jammed both my fists in my trousers pockets, and walked away, holding myself in, as it were, and cursing my luck."

"You did right, Jim," said the other, after a pause. "You deserve to be congratulated."

"It was pretty difficult," Braid added. "I could have knocked him into a cocked hat, and near as a touch I did it."

"Though he's my cousin," said Harry, "I'm afraid he's a bad lot. He's very unpopular in the diplomatic club in London to which he belongs. When I went

back to school last term I happened to travel in the same carriage as two men who had known him well in Germany, and who talked about him the whole way. It appears that he's sowing his wild oats right and left, that he's always gambling and is already heavily in debt."

"I fancy," said Braid, "that a gamekeeper soon learns to know a rogue when he sees one. You see, sir, we're always after foxes or poachers or weasels; and the first time as ever I set eyes on Captain von Hardenberg, I said to myself: 'That man's one of them that try to live by their wits.'"

"I think," said Harry, "we had better talk about something else. In point of fact, Jim, I had no right to discuss my cousin at all. But I was carried away by my feelings when you told me he had struck you."

"I understand, sir," said the young gamekeeper, with a nod.

"At all events, we must make the best of him. We're to have him here for a month."

"As long as he doesn't cross my path," said Jim Braid, "I'll not meddle with him."

Soon after that they parted, Harry going towards the house, Jim taking the path that led to his father's cottage.

In the hall Harry found his cousin, who had already taken off his hat and overcoat, and was now seated before a roaring fire, with a cigarette in one hand and an empty wine glass in the other.

"Hallo!" said von Hardenberg, who spoke English perfectly. "Didn't know I was to have the pleasure of your company. Where's my uncle?"

"In the bungalow," said Harry. "During the last few days he's been extremely hard at work."

"How do you like school?" asked the young Prussian.

His manner was particularly domineering. With his sleek, black hair, carefully parted in the middle, and his neatly trimmed moustache, he had the appearance of a very superior person. Moreover, he did not attempt to disguise the fact that he looked upon his schoolboy cousin barely with toleration, if not with actual contempt.

"I like it tremendously!" said Harry, brightening up at once. "I suppose you know I got into the Cricket Eleven, and took four wickets against Harrow?"

He said this with frank, boyish enthusiasm. There was nothing boastful about it. Von Hardenberg, raising his eyebrows, flicked some cigarette-ash from his trousers.

"*Himmel!*" he observed. "You don't suppose I take the least interest in what you do against Harrow. The whole of your nation appears to think of nothing but play. As for us Germans, we have something better to think of!"

Harry looked at his cousin. For a moment a spirit of mischief rose within

him, and he had half a mind to ask whether von Hardenberg had forgotten his gambling debts. However, he thought better of it, and went upstairs to dress for dinner.

The Judge came late from the bungalow, bursting into the dining-room as his two nephews were seating themselves at the table, saying that he had no time to change.

"Boys," he cried, rubbing his hands together, "I've made the greatest discovery of my life! I've hit upon a thing that will set the whole world talking for a month! I've discovered the Sunstone! I've solved its mystery! As you, Carl, would say, the whole thing's *colossal*!"

"The Sunstone!" cried Harry. "What is that?"

"The Sunstone," said the Judge, "has been known to exist for centuries. It is the key to the storehouse of one of the greatest treasures the world contains. It has been in my possession for nine years, and not till this evening did I dream that I possessed it."

"Come!" cried Harry. "You must tell us all about it!"

CHAPTER II--The Sunstone

"Well," said the Judge, pushing aside the plate of soup which he had hardly tasted, "I don't know whether or not the story will interest you. It ought to, because it's romantic, and also melodramatic--that is to say, it is concerned with death. It came into my possession nine years ago, when I was presiding judge at Sierra Leone. I remember being informed by the police that a native from the region of Lake Chad had come into the country with several Arabs on his track. He had fled for his life from the hills; he had gone as far south as the Congo, and had then cut back on his tracks; and all this time, over thousands of miles of almost impenetrable country, the Arabs--slave-traders by repute--had clung to his heels like bloodhounds. In Sierra Leone he turned upon his tormentors and killed two of them. He was brought before me on a charge of murder, and I had no option but to sentence him to death. The day before he was hanged he wished to see me, and I visited him in prison. He gave into my hands a large, circular piece of jade, and I have kept it ever since, always looking upon it merely as a curiosity and a

memento of a very unpleasant duty. Never for a moment did I dream it was the Sunstone itself.

"Now, before you can understand the whole story, you must know something of Zoroaster. Zoroaster was the preacher, or prophet, who was responsible for the most ancient religion in the world. He was the first of the Magi, or the Wise Men of the East, and it was he who framed the famous laws of the Medes and Persians. He is supposed to have lived more than six thousand years before Christ.

"The doctrine of Zoroaster is concerned with the worship of the sun; hence the name of the Sunstone. This religion was adopted by the Persians, who conquered Egypt, and thus spread their influence across the Red Sea into Africa. To-day, among the hills that surround Lake Chad, there exists a tribe of which little is known, except that they are called the Maziris, and are believed still to follow the religion of Zoroaster.

"In the days when Zoroaster preached, it was the custom of his followers and admirers to present the sage with jewels and precious stones. These were first given as alms, to enable him to live; but, as his fame extended, the treasure became so great that it far exceeded his needs.

"One rumour has it that Zoroaster died in the Himalayas; another that his body was embalmed in Egypt and conveyed by a party of Ethiopians into the very heart of the Dark Continent, where it was buried in a cave with all his treasure.

"The Sunstone is referred to by many ancient Persian writers. I have known of it for years as the key to the treasure of Zoroaster. As I have said, it is a circular piece of jade, bright yellow in colour, and of about the size of a saucer. On both sides of the stone various signs and symbols have been cut. On one side, from the centre, nine radii divide the circumference into nine equal arcs. In each arc is a distinct cuneiform character, similar to those which have been found upon the stone monuments of Persia and Arabia.

"The Arabs are in many ways the most wonderful people in the world. Their vitality as a race is amazing. For centuries--possibly for thousands of years--they have terrorized northern and central Africa. They were feared by the ancient Egyptians, who built walls around their cities to protect them from the Bedouins--the ancestors of the men who to-day lead their caravans to Erzerum, Zanzibar, and Timbuctoo.

"So far as I can discover, the Maziris are an Arab tribe who have given up their old nomad life. Somewhere in the Maziri country is a group of caves which no European has ever entered. They are known as the 'Caves of Zoroaster', for it is here that the sage is supposed to have been buried. The bones of Zoroaster, as well as the jewels, are said to lie in a vault cut in the living rock; and the Sunstone is the key which opens the entrance to that vault. The man, whom in my capacity

as a judge I was obliged to sentence to death, had no doubt stolen it, and had been pursued across the continent by the Maziri chieftains, who desired to recover the Sunstone.

"There is the whole story. A week ago I came across a description of the Sunstone in the writings of a Persian historian, and that description led me to suspect that the very thing was in my own possession. I followed up clue after clue, and this evening I put the matter beyond all doubt."

Mr. Langton's two nephews had listened in breathless interest. Harry was leaning forward with his elbows on the table and his chin upon a hand. Von Hardenberg lay back in a chair, his arms folded, his dark eyes fixed upon his uncle.

"Then," said he, "you have but to get into these so-called 'Caves of Zoroaster' to possess yourself of the jewels?"

The Judge smiled, and shook his head.

"And to get into the caves," he answered, "is just the very thing that, for the present, it is almost impossible for any European to do. The Maziri are a wild and lawless tribe. They are indeed so bloodthirsty, their country so mountainous, and their valleys so infertile, that hitherto no one has ever interfered with their affairs. Like all the Arabs, they are a nation of robbers and cut-throats, who lived in the past by means of the slave-trade, and to-day exist by cattle-stealing and robbery. The man who tries to enter the 'Caves of Zoroaster' will have his work cut out."

"Will you let us see the Sunstone?" asked Harry.

"Certainly, my boy," said Mr. Langton. "I'll take you both down to the bungalow to-morrow morning, or--if you cannot wait till then--we can go to-night."

"Isn't it rather risky," asked von Hardenberg, "to keep such a valuable thing out of the house?"

"The bungalow is always locked," said Mr. Langton, "and I keep the Sunstone in a cabinet. Moreover, you must remember that nobody knows of its value. No thief would ever dream of stealing it. It is, to all appearances, only an inferior piece of jade."

"But you have money there as well?" said von Hardenberg.

"Not much," answered the Judge. "Since I do my accounts there it is convenient to have my cashbox at hand. But it seldom contains more than twenty pounds--the amount of money I require to pay the men employed on the estate."

"What an extraordinary thing," said Harry, still thinking of the treasure of Zoroaster, "that it should have existed for all these years and never have been plundered."

"Not so extraordinary," said Mr. Langton, "when you know the Arabs. The Maziris, as I have told you, are of Arab descent, though they are not followers of the Prophet. The sun-worshippers are extremely devout. No priest of Zoroaster would think of stealing the treasure; that would be to plunge his soul into eternal

punishment."

"And no one else," asked von Hardenberg, "no Mohammedan or heathen, has ever been able to enter the vault?"

"Never," said Mr. Langton, "because the Sunstone is the secret. That is why, when the Sunstone was stolen, they were so anxious to run the thief to earth."

Von Hardenberg knit his brows. He was silent for a moment, and appeared to be thinking.

"And you believe you have solved the mystery?" he asked.

"I know I have," said the Judge. "If at this moment I suddenly found myself in the Caves of Zoroaster, with the Sunstone in my hand, I could gain access to the vault."

Von Hardenberg bit his lip quickly, and then looked sharply at his uncle. When he spoke, it was in the voice of a man who took little or no interest in the subject under discussion.

"I should rather like to see it," he remarked.

Accordingly, as soon as dinner was finished, they put on their overcoats, and conducted by the Judge, who carried a lantern, they followed a path through the woods until they came to the bungalow.

Mr. Langton unlocked the door and put the key into his pocket. Then he lit an oil lamp, which presently burned up and illumined the room. They found themselves in what to all intents and purposes was a library. The four walls were stacked with books, but the overflow of these was so great that many were piled upon chairs and in odd corners of the room. In the centre of the floor-space was a large writing-desk, and near this a cabinet with several drawers. Lying open on the writing-desk was a fair-sized cash-box, in which several golden sovereigns glittered in the light.

"How careless, to be sure!" exclaimed the Judge. "I had no business to leave my cash-box open. The truth is, I was so excited about this discovery that I forgot to put it away."

"And where's the Sunstone?" asked von Hardenberg.

"I keep it here," said Mr. Langton.

Going to the cabinet, and unlocking the third drawer from the top, he took out a large stone and laid it on the table in the light of the lamp. His two nephews, one on either side of him, leaned forward to examine this extraordinary relic.

On one side of the Sunstone were the cuneiform characters already mentioned by the Judge. On the other was a great deal of writing in the same primitive language, scratched upon the face of the jade, but so faint as to be barely legible.

"It was only with the greatest difficulty," observed the Judge, "that I managed to decipher and translate this writing. It is in no known language. Indeed, I would never have been able to make head or tail of it had I not been a scholar of Sanskrit.

This writing is nothing more nor less than the definite instructions for using the Sunstone for the purpose of entering the vaults of Zoroaster."

"What does it say?" asked von Hardenberg.

"You are told to begin with a certain character and take the others in a circle 'in the way of the sun'--that is to say, from left to right, as with the hands of a clock. Before the main vault is a large lock, which works on the same principle as the modern Bramah lock--a very ancient device. It consists of nine enormous wheels. The outside, or tyre, of each of these wheels is adorned with hundreds of cuneiform characters, all of them quite different. Each wheel must be turned until the characters visible along a given line correspond with those upon the Sunstone. Not otherwise can the vault be opened."

There followed a silence of several moments. The Judge's discovery seemed so romantic and so astonishing that it was almost impossible to believe it was true. After a while, it was von Hardenberg who spoke.

"And now that you have made this discovery," he asked, "what do you propose to do?"

"I don't know," said the Judge. "I have no desire to pillage a sacred shrine. For the present I propose to keep the affair a secret whilst I continue my researches. There are several points upon which the historical world desires to be enlightened. Very little is known concerning the life of Zoroaster."

"But surely," exclaimed von Hardenberg, "you don't intend to keep this to yourself!"

"When I have the whole facts of the case at my finger-tips," said the Judge, "I will make the result of my investigations known to the authorities of the British Museum."

Soon after that they left the bungalow. Before they went to bed that night von Hardenberg took his cousin aside and looked at him intently.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

"Of the Sunstone?" asked Harry.

"Yes," said the other. "It seems to me, if the old gentleman wanted to, he could make himself a millionaire."

Harry laughed.

"I don't think Uncle Jack cares much about money," said he. "He looks at the whole matter from a scientific point of view."

"No doubt," exclaimed the Prussian. "No doubt. I dare say he does."

And at that he turned and went slowly up the stairs.

CHAPTER III--Caught Red-handed

Some hours after sunset, on the evening of the following day, Jim Braid was stationed in the woods, on the look-out for poachers. His father, John Braid, the head-gamekeeper, was also out that night, keeping watch in a different part of the estate. A well-known gang of poachers had been reported in the district, and, the week before, several shots had been heard as late as twelve o'clock, for which the gamekeepers could not account.

The night was cold and foggy, and Jim wore the collar of his coat turned up, and carried his gun under his arm, with his hands thrust deep into his breeches pockets.

He was moving along the edge of the coverts, which lay between Mr. Langton's bungalow and the house, when suddenly he became conscious of footsteps approaching stealthily through the woods. Without a moment's thought he dropped flat upon his face, and lay close as a hare, concealed in a clump of bracken. From this position he was able to see the path by which the intruder approached; he could also command a view of the windows of Friar's Court, several of which were illumined.

The dark figure of a man came from among the trees. Jim, taking his whistle from his pocket, put it to his lips, and was about to sound the alarm which would bring his father and the other keepers to the spot, when he was arrested by the man's singular appearance.

This was no common poacher. He wore a heavy fur overcoat, and carried in his hand--not a gun--but no more formidable a weapon than an umbrella. On his head, tilted at an angle, was a white bowler hat.

Jim Braid was in two minds what to do, and was even about to show himself to the stranger and ask his business, when the front door of the house opened, and he made out the figure of Captain von Hardenberg silhouetted against the light in the hall. Jim had no particular desire to eavesdrop. Still, as we know, he

disliked and mistrusted the Prussian; and, besides, the secretive manner in which the stranger was careful to keep in the shadow of the trees had already aroused his suspicions.

When the man with the white hat saw von Hardenberg, he whistled softly, and went forward a little towards him. They met a few yards from where Jim Braid was hiding. The stranger at once held out a hand. Von Hardenberg refused to take it.

"I knew you'd come here," said he. "Can't you leave me alone?"

"You're four months overdue, Captain von Hardenberg," answered the other. "My interest is increasing day by day. You owe me nearly four thousand pounds!"

"Well, I can't pay," said von Hardenberg. "And there's an end of it."

"Captain von Hardenberg," said the man, who spoke English with a strong German accent. "I am sick of you. In a word, I have found you out. You desire the services of a spy--one who has access to valuable information--and you come to me, Peter Klein, even myself, who as the butler of a cabinet minister have many opportunities of reading letters and overhearing the consultations of those who are suppose to govern these sleepy, fog-begotten islands. You are paid from Berlin, and you are paid to pay me. And what do you do with the money? Gamble. In a word, you play cards and lose money which by right is mine, which I--not you--have earned. Then you beseech me to hold my tongue, promising me that you will repay me with interest as soon as ever you have inherited your uncle's estates. This, I find, is a lie. Your uncle has another nephew, just as likely to inherit his capital as you. You play with me. But I hold you in the hollow of my hand. Remember, I have only to report you to Berlin, and you are ruined, once and for all."

Von Hardenberg was silent for some moments. Then he spoke in a quick, jerky voice.

"Look here," said he; "it's no good. This very evening, knowing that you were coming, I made a clean breast of it to my uncle. I told him that I was four thousand pounds in debt to a money-lender, and that, if I couldn't pay, you would come down upon me. I suppose you don't mind that. I couldn't tell him you were a Government spy disguised as a butler in a private house. And what do you think he said?"

"I have not the least idea," said the other.

"He told me," said von Hardenberg, "that he would cut me off with a shilling!"

Mr. Peter Klein was heard to gasp. Thrusting his hat well back upon his head, he threw out his hands and gesticulated wildly.

"Then, you're a thief!" he cried. "What it comes to is this: you have embezzled Government money. I have given the Wilhelmstrasse valuable information,

and I have never received a penny."

"Do what you like," answered von Hardenberg. "I cannot pay."

"I'll have you court-martialled!" the other cried. "The Wilhelmstrasse will be on my side. You have made a fool of me."

Von Hardenberg grasped the man by the wrist.

"Listen here," said he. "Can you wait a week?"

"Yes. I can. But why?"

"Because I know how I can get hold of the money, though it will take some getting. You had better go back to London. I promise to call at your office within a few days, and then I shall have something to tell you."

Peter Klein turned the matter over in his mind. As long as there remained a chance of getting his money he thought it worth while to take it. For all his threats, he knew enough of the Secret Service department in the Wilhelmstrasse in Berlin to know that in a fight against a Prussian military attaché he would stand but a poor chance. However, he was cunning enough to point out to von Hardenberg that the Wilhelmstrasse might think that the services of Peter Klein might possibly be valuable in the future. Then, he went his way, walking quickly through the woods in the direction of the railway station. As for von Hardenberg, he returned to the house; and no sooner was he gone than Jim Braid got to his feet.

The young gamekeeper had been able to understand only a third of what had been said, for they had lapsed from German into English, and back to German again. But, that night--or, rather, early the following morning--when he went to bed, he thought over the matter for some time, and had half a mind to tell his father. However, in the end he came to the conclusion that it was no business of his, and slept the sleep of the just.

The following afternoon he was engaged in driving into the ground a series of hurdles to keep the cattle from the pheasant coverts, when he was approached by Mr. Langton.

"Hard at work, Jim?" asked the Judge.

"Yes, sir," said Jim, touching his cap. "These are the old hurdles we brought up from Boot's Hollow."

"That's a useful weapon, anyhow," said the Judge, indicating the crowbar with which Jim was working.

"Yes, sir, it's a handy tool, and sharp in the bargain."

At that the Judge wished the boy "Good-night!" and went his way towards the house. Hardly had he departed than Captain von Hardenberg brushed his way through some thickets near at hand, and approached the young gamekeeper. He must certainly have overheard the conversation that had passed between Jim Braid and the Judge.

"Braid," said he, "would you mind lending me that crowbar?"

"I've finished with it to-night, sir," said Braid, "but I shall want it to-morrow morning."

"I'll let you have it back by then," said the other. And taking the unwieldy tool from Jim's hands, he walked with it towards the house.

No sooner was he out of sight, however, than he dropped down upon a knee and looked furtively about him, as if to satisfy himself that he was not observed. Then he thrust the crowbar down a rabbit-hole, the mouth of which he covered over with several fronds of bracken. That done, he walked quickly towards the house.

That night, towards midnight, when everyone else in Friar's Court was sound asleep, Captain Carl von Hardenberg sat, fully dressed, at the foot of his bed with a cigar between his lips. He had taken off his dress-coat and put on an old Norfolk jacket. On his feet he wore long gum-boots, into which he had tucked his trousers. He sat looking at the clock, which was but dimly visible upon the mantelpiece through the clouds of tobacco-smoke with which the room was filled.

Presently the clock struck twelve, and at that von Hardenberg rose to his feet and went on tiptoe to the door. Without a sound he passed out, walked quickly down the passage, and descended the back stairs to the kitchen. With nervous hands he opened the scullery door, and then paused to listen. Hearing no sound, he stepped quickly into the yard.

He walked rapidly past the lawns which lie between Friar's Court and the woods. Once inside the woods, he immediately sought out the path that led straight to the bungalow. He had some difficulty in finding the rabbit-hole in which he had hidden the crowbar, and only succeeded in doing so with the aid of a lighted match. It was the flare of this match that attracted Jim Braid, who was again on duty in this part of the estate.

Von Hardenberg, the crowbar in his hand, approached the bungalow. With all his strength he drove the crowbar between the door and the jamb, and with one wrench broke open the lock.

In his uncle's study he lit the oil lamp that stood upon the central table. He was surprised to see that the Judge had again left his cash-box on the desk. The cash-box, however, was not his business; he was determined to possess himself of the Sunstone.

He had provided himself with a bunch of skeleton keys. Those whose business it is to employ Government spies are not infrequently provided with such things. After several futile attempts he succeeded in opening the third drawer in the cabinet. Then, with the precious stone in his hand, he rushed to the lamp and examined the Sunstone in the light.

"Now," he cried--he was so excited that he spoke aloud--"now for the Ger-

man Cameroons!"

And scarcely had he said the words than he looked up, and there in the doorway was Jim Braid, the gamekeeper's son.

"Hands up!" cried Braid, bringing his gun to his shoulder.

Captain von Hardenberg looked about him like a hunted beast.

"Don't be a fool!" he exclaimed. "You know who I am!"

"Yes, I do," said Braid; "and you're up to no good. Hands up, I say!"

Von Hardenberg held up his hands, and then tried to laugh it off.

"You're mad!" said he more quietly. "Surely you don't imagine I'm a thief?"

"I'm not given much to imagining things," said Braid. "All I know is, you broke in here by force."

As he was speaking, before the last words had left his mouth, von Hardenberg, with a quick and desperate action, had seized the gun by the barrel. There followed a struggle, during which the gun went off.

There was a loud report and a piercing cry, and Jim Braid fell forward on his face. Even as he rolled over upon the ground, a black pool of blood spread slowly across the floor.

The Prussian went to the door and listened. He saw lights appear in the windows of the house, and one or two were thrown open. Near at hand he heard the strong voice of John Braid, the keeper, shouting to his son. On the other side of the bungalow, an under-gamekeeper was hurrying to the place.

Von Hardenberg's face was ashen white. His hands were shaking, his lips moving with strange, convulsive jerks.

He went quickly to the body of the unconscious boy, and, kneeling down, felt Braid's heart.

"Thank Heaven," said he, "he is not killed."

And then a new fear possessed him. If Jim Braid was not dead, he would live to accuse von Hardenberg of the theft. The Prussian stood bolt upright, his teeth fastened on his under lip. The voices without were nearer to the house than before. He had not ten seconds in which to act.

Seizing the cash-box, he laid it on the ground and dealt it a shivering blow with the crowbar. The lid flew open, and the contents--a score of sovereigns--were scattered on the floor. These he gathered together and thrust into the pockets of the unconscious boy. Then he took the crowbar and closed Jim's fingers about it. It was at that moment that John Braid, the gamekeeper, burst into the room.

"What's this?" he cried.

"I regret to tell you," said Captain von Hardenberg, "that your son is a thief. I caught him red-handed."

CHAPTER IV--False Evidence

In less than a minute the bungalow was crowded. Close upon the head-gamekeeper's heels came one of his assistants, and after him Mr. Langton himself and Harry, followed by several servants from the house.

When John Braid heard von Hardenberg's words, accusing his son of theft, it was as if a blow had been struck him. He looked about him like a man dazed, and then carried a hand across his eyes. Then, without a word, he went down upon his knees at his son's side and examined the wounded boy.

"He's not dead," said he in a husky voice. "I can feel his heart distinctly."

It was at this moment that the Judge rushed into the room. His bare feet were encased in bedroom slippers; he was dressed in a shirt and a pair of trousers.

"Whatever has happened?" he exclaimed.

He repeated the question several times before anyone answered, and by then the room was full. The chauffeur was sent back post-haste to the stables, with orders to drive for a doctor.

"How did it happen, John?" repeated Mr. Langton.

But the gamekeeper shook his head. He had the look of a man who is not completely master of his senses.

The Judge regarded his nephew.

"Carl," said he, "can you explain how this--accident occurred?"

"Certainly!" said von Hardenberg, who now realized, that to save himself, all his presence of mind was necessary.

"Then," said the Judge, "be so good as to do so."

"After my yesterday's interview with you," von Hardenberg began, in tones of complete assurance, "as you may imagine, I had several letters to write, and to-night I did not think of getting into bed till nearly twelve o'clock. Before I began to undress I went to the window and opened it. As I did so I saw a man cross the lawn and enter the woods. As his conduct was suspicious, I took him for a poacher. As quickly as possible I left the house and walked in the direction I knew the man had taken."

"Why did not you wake any of us?" asked the Judge, who was in his own element, and might have been examining a witness in the box.

Von Hardenberg, however, did not appear to be the least alarmed. He answered his uncle slowly, but without the slightest hesitation.

"For the very simple reason," said he, "that I did not wish to make a fool of myself. I half expected that the man would prove to be a gamekeeper."

"Then why did you follow him?"

"For two reasons. First, because I wanted to satisfy myself as to who he was, and, secondly, because a man who has just learnt he is to remain a pauper for life does not, as a rule, feel inclined for sleep. I wanted to go out into the air."

"Well," asked the Judge, "and then what happened?"

"I was unable to find the man in the woods, until I heard a noise in the direction of the bungalow. To the bungalow, accordingly I went, as quickly as I could. I got there in time to see him break open the door with a crowbar. There is the crowbar in his hand."

Everyone in the room caught his breath. Such an accusation against Jim Braid was almost incomprehensible. The boy was believed to be perfectly honest and trustworthy; and yet, as Captain von Hardenberg had said, there was the crowbar in his hand.

"And then?" prompted the judge.

"And then," the Prussian continued, "I watched him enter the room. I could see him through the window. He went straight to your desk, took the cash-box, and burst it open with the crowbar. There is the box lying on the floor. If you examine it, you will see that I speak the truth."

The judge picked up the box and looked at it.

"You are prepared to swear to this?" he asked.

"In a court of law," said the other--and never flinched.

It was the Judge himself who emptied Jim's pockets, and there sure enough he found the sovereigns which had been taken from the cash-box.

"I would never have believed it!" he exclaimed. "It's terrible to think that one of my own servants should have treated me thus!"

It was then that Harry Urquhart spoke for the first time. He could not stand by and see his old friend so basely accused and not offer a word in his defence.

"It's a lie!" he cried, his indignation rising in a flood. "A base, unmitigated lie! Uncle," he pleaded, "you don't believe it, surely?"

The Judge shook his head.

"It would be very foolish for me," said he, "to give an opinion one way or the other, before the boy has had a chance to speak in his own defence. I must admit, however, that the evidence is very strong against him."

A hurdle was fetched, upon which a mattress was laid; and upon this the

wounded boy was carried to the house, which was nearer to the bungalow than his father's cottage. By a strange coincidence, it was one of the very hurdles that Jim had been setting up that afternoon.

The doctor, who lived at some distance, did not arrive for an hour. After a short examination of the patient he was able to give a satisfactory report. The gun had gone off at too close a range to allow the shot to scatter, and only about a quarter of the pellets had entered the boy's side, the rest tearing a great hole in his coat and waistcoat. The wound was large and gaping, but no artery was touched, and before they reached the house, and Jim had been laid upon the bed in Harry's room, the patient had recovered consciousness.

For all that, it was several days before the doctor would allow him to see anyone. He was to be kept perfectly quiet, and not excited in any way. During that time he was attended with the greatest care, not only by the housekeeper and Harry Urquhart, but by Mr. Langton himself.

At the end of a week, a naturally strong constitution, and the good health resulting from a life that is lived in the open air, had done their work, and Jim was allowed to get up. It was soon after that that the Judge heard the case in his dining-room, where, seated at the head of the table, pen in hand, he might have been back in his old place in the Supreme Court of Sierra Leone.

Jim Braid--who, in very truth, was the prisoner in the dock--was seated on a chair, facing the Judge. On either side of the table were those whom Mr. Langton proposed to call as witnesses--namely, Captain von Hardenberg, John Braid, and the under-gamekeeper.

The face of the prisoner in the dock was white as a sheet. Harry Urquhart stood behind his uncle's chair, regarding his old friend with commiseration in his eyes and a deep sympathy in his heart.

Von Hardenberg's evidence differed in no material points from what he had said before. Indeed, he played his cards with almost fiendish cunning. The circumstantial evidence was all against the boy. The Judge had not yet discovered that the Sunstone was missing. There was no doubt that both the door of the bungalow and the cash-box had been broken open by the crowbar--moreover, the very crowbar which the Judge himself had seen in Jim's hands on the afternoon of the crime. Neither John Braid nor any other gamekeeper could do anything but bear out the testimony of von Hardenberg. When they entered the bungalow the boy's guilt had seemed manifest.

In his own defence Jim could state as much of the truth as he knew. He said that he had seen von Hardenberg break into the bungalow; he swore that he had lent him the crowbar that very day. Asked why he supposed the Judge's nephew had become a burglar, he was unable to give an answer. From his position he had not been able to see into the room; he had not the slightest idea what von

Hardenberg did immediately after entering.

All this the Judge flatly refused to believe. He protested that it was ridiculous to suppose that a young man of von Hardenberg's position would rifle a cash-box, containing about twenty pounds. In Mr. Langton's opinion, the case was proved against the boy; he could not doubt that he was guilty. He said that he would refrain from prosecuting, since John Braid had served him faithfully for many years, but he was unwilling any longer to employ Jim on the estate.

When Mr. Langton had finished, John Braid asked for permission to speak, and then turned upon his son with a savage fierceness that was terrible to see. He disowned him; he was no longer a son of his. He pointed out the benefits Jim had received at the hands of Mr. Langton, and swore that he had never dreamed that such ingratitude was possible. As far as he was concerned, he had done with his son, once and for all. He would blot out his memory. Henceforward Jim could fend for himself.

Still weak from his wounds, and with a far greater pain in his heart than ever came from physical hurt, the boy rose to his feet and slowly and in silence left the room. He went to his father's cottage, and there saw his mother, from whom he parted in tears. Then, shouldering the few belongings he possessed, done up in a bundle that he proposed to carry on the end of a stick, he went his way down the drive of Friar's Court.

He had not gone far before he heard footsteps approaching, and, turning, beheld Harry Urquhart, running forward in haste. The boy waited until his friend had come up with him. He tried to speak, but found that impossible. Something rose in his throat and choked his power of utterance.

"You believe in me?" said he at last.

"I do," cried Harry, "and I always will! I know that you are innocent!"

"Thank you for that, sir!" said Jim. "I can go my way with a lighter heart."

"Where are you going?" asked Harry.

"I don't know, sir, and I don't think I care. Anywhere, so long as I can get away from this place where I am suspected and despised!"

"Have you any money?" asked Harry.

Jim shook his head.

"Here you are. Take this. It's all I have." And Harry thrust into his friend's hand a five-pound note.

Jim hesitated to take it; but in the end he did so, folding it carefully and putting it into his waistcoat pocket.

"God bless you, sir!" said he.

"I'll make it my life's work," cried Harry, "to prove your innocence. I'm confident I will succeed in the end. For the present, good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" said the other. He dared not look young Urquhart in the face,

for his eyes were filling fast with tears.

Then he went his way, throwing himself upon the mercy of the world, with life before him to be started all anew. Under his own name, and with his old surroundings, he was disinherited, disowned, and dishonoured. He must find some new employment. He must endeavour to forget and to live down the past.

At the gate of the drive he came into the highroad, and, turning his face towards London, set forward, walking as quickly as he could.

CHAPTER V--The Eleventh Hour

The following day Captain von Hardenberg left Friar's Court. He had more reasons than one to be anxious to return to London.

The robbery and the outrage at the bungalow had sadly interrupted Mr. Langton's studies. Nearly a month elapsed before the Judge took up his old researches, and then it was that for the first time he discovered that the Sunstone was missing. Search where he might, he could find it nowhere. The evidence was against Jim Braid, and there was no one to speak up on his behalf, for by then Harry Urquhart had returned to school. On the night Braid was wounded, only his coat pockets had been emptied, and, since the whole of the money had been recovered, no further search had been made. The Judge had little doubt in his mind that, as well as the contents of the cash-box, the boy had stolen the Sunstone, though poor Jim could have had no idea as to its value.

Mr. Langton was determined to recover the relic at all costs. He spent a great deal of money on advertisements, and gave a full description of Braid to the police; but no trace of the boy could be found. It was not until Christmas had come, and Harry Urquhart was again at Friar's Court, that the Judge told his nephew of his suspicions.

And though Harry was sure of Braid's innocence, he could not convince the Judge. Mr. Langton's mind was the mind of a lawyer; he based his conclusions upon the testimony of facts, and never allowed his personal opinions to influence him in the least.

Though the police had failed to discover any trace of Braid, Harry was determined to find him. Since he had now left school, he obtained permission from his uncle to go to London. He felt perfectly certain that Braid was somewhere in the great city where it is possible for a man to hide himself from the eyes of the world, even to bury his identity.

In the meantime, Captain von Hardenberg had presented himself before Peter Klein, the informer, and a long interview had taken place between them.

Peter listened to the whole story of the Sunstone, doubted it one moment, believed it the next; and fingered the strange jade ornament, first with reverence, and then almost with suspicion. He examined it through a magnifying-glass, shook his head, shrugged his shoulders, and found it impossible to make up his mind. Von Hardenberg made no secret of the fact that he was determined to undertake a journey through the German colonial territory of the Cameroons to the Caves of Zoroaster, to recover the jewels that were hidden in the vault. With the treasure once in his possession, he swore that he would pay Klein, not only the full amount that was due to him, but ten per cent of the total profits.

Now, Peter Klein was a usurer--as well as a butler and a spy--one who drove a hard bargain, who was relentless to his victims. He said that he himself was tired of cities, that the suspicions of the British police authorities had already been aroused in regard to his occupation, and that therefore he also would like to travel. He would accompany von Hardenberg to the West Coast, which was once called the White-Man's Grave; he would penetrate the bush to the Cameroon peaks, even to the Caves of Zoroaster. But he would require more than ten per cent: they would share and share alike.

Von Hardenberg was in no position to refuse. This man had him in his clutches. Klein knew well that the Prussian was ruined for life if ever his conduct was made known to the departmental heads of the German Secret Service. And, moreover, in a few days Klein had gained the whip hand by enlisting in his services an Arab whom he found starving in the vicinity of the docks.

This man, though he was poor, in rags, and well-nigh perishing in the cold, was learned in many things. Like all his race, he was a nomad--a man who had roamed the world throughout his life, who had even been all-powerful in his day. He had sold ivory in Zanzibar; he had stolen cattle in the neighbourhood of Lake Chad, and driven his capture across the great plains to the east; he had hunted for slaves in the Upper Congo and the Aruwimi. Though he was starving, he boasted that he was a sheik, and said that his name was Bayram. He said he had been to the Cameroons River, and that he despised the Negro from Loango to Zanzibar. He was confident that, provided he was rewarded, he could render invaluable services to his employer. He had never before heard of the Sunstone, but, from rumours he had heard, there was a treasure hidden somewhere in the

mist-shrouded mountains that guard Lake Chad to the east.

To return to Jim Braid. All these winter months he wandered the streets of London. He found the greatest difficulty in getting work. He had no trade but that of a gamekeeper, and such business was at a discount in the midst of the great, seething city. He was out of work for some weeks; then he obtained work in the docks; after which he was again unemployed for nearly a month. By that time he had got to the end of his money, and was obliged to pawn his clothes. He thanked Heaven when the snow came; for, though the frost was severe, and his clothes in rags, he saw employment in sweeping the pavements and the roads.

Then the thaw followed, and he was starving again. One night he found himself in Jermyn Street. He had had no food that day. A taxi-cab drew up before a doorway, upon which was a brass plate bearing the name "Peter Klein".

Jim was conscious of the fact that he had heard the name before, he could not remember where. Just then, starvation, ill-health, and the misery in his heart had broken the boy completely; it was as if his senses were numbed. All that interested him was the taxi, by the side of which he remained, in the hope of earning a copper by opening the door. Presently a manservant came from the house, carrying a box. Jim volunteered to help him, and the man agreed. Together they put the box upon the taxi-cab, and Jim noticed that it bore the same name, "Peter Klein", and several steamship labels, upon each of which was written the word "Old Calabar". Jim Braid saw these things like one who is half-dazed, without understanding what they meant.

There were several other boxes to be put on to the cab, and when the work was finished, and the driver had strapped them securely together, two men came from the house, followed by one who wore a turban, and shivered from the cold.

Jim's attention was attracted by the native. He was very tall and thin. He had a great black beard, and his eyes were like those of a bird of prey. They were cruel, bloodshot, and passionate.

One of the Europeans, who wore a fur coat, got into the cab. The other paused with his foot upon the step and looked Jim Braid in the face. Near by a street lamp flared and flickered, and in the light Jim recognized the features of Captain von Hardenberg, the man who had been his accuser.

He stared at him in amazement. He had not the power to speak. He thought, at first, that he, too, would be recognized. He did not know that misfortune had so changed him that his own mother would not have known him. He was thin and haggard-looking; his rags hung loosely upon his gaunt form; his hair was so long that it extended over his ears.

"Are you the man," said von Hardenberg in his old, insolent way, "who helped to carry the boxes?"

"Yes," said Jim, "I am."

"There you are, then. There's sixpence, and don't spend it on drink."

At that the Prussian jumped into the taxi, telling the driver to go to Charing Cross. The Arab followed, closing the door, and a few seconds later the taxi was driving down the street.

Jim Braid stood on the pavement under the street lamp, regarding the sixpence in his hand. He was starving; his bones ached from physical exhaustion; his head throbbed in a kind of fever. He knew not where he would sleep. This sixpence to him was wealth.

For a moment he was tempted, but not for longer. With a quick, spasmodic action he hurled the coin into the gutter, and walked away quickly in the direction of the Haymarket.

He knew not where he was going. The streets were crowded. People were going to the theatre. Outside a fashionable restaurant a lady with a gorgeous opera-cloak brushed against him, and uttered an exclamation of disgust. He walked on more rapidly than before, and came presently to Trafalgar Square, and before he knew where he was he found himself on the Embankment. Slowly he walked up the steps towards the Hungerford footbridge; and there, pausing, with his folded arms upon the rails, he looked down into the water.

At that moment the sound of footsteps attracted his attention. He looked up into a face that he recognized at once. It was that of Harry Urquhart, his only friend, the only person in the world who had believed him innocent.

CHAPTER VI--The Pursuit Begins

"Jim!" cried Harry.

So astonished was he that he reeled backward as though he had been struck.

"My poor, old friend," said Harry. "I have searched for you everywhere, and had almost given up hope of finding you. I don't know what led my footsteps to the bridge."

At that Jim Braid burst into tears.

"It was the work of God," said he.

Harry said nothing, but pressed Jim's arm. At the bottom of Northumberland Avenue he hailed a taxi, and the driver looked somewhat astonished when this ragged pauper got into the cab and seated himself at the side of his well-dressed companion.

Harry had rooms in Davies Street, where he thrust Jim into an arm-chair before the fire, upon which he heaped more coals. Braid, leaning forward, held out his hands before the cheerful blaze. As Harry looked at him, a great feeling of pity arose in his heart. The boy looked so miserable and wretched that he appeared barely to cling to life.

Harry would not allow him to speak, until he had eaten a meal. Braid fell upon his food like a wolf. He had had absolutely nothing to eat for two days.

It is not wise to feed a starving man to repletion. But perhaps in Braid's case this made little or no difference, since the boy was on the verge of double pneumonia. Within twenty-four hours he was in a raging fever, and for days afterwards the doctor despaired of saving his life. Starvation, cold, dirt, to say nothing of his wound, had done their work; but a strong heart and youth pulled him through.

It was nearly three months afterwards, when the spring was well advanced, that one afternoon the two friends talked the whole matter out.

Harry looked at Jim Braid and smiled.

"You're a different fellow now," said he. "It was a near thing though. One night the doctor gave you up. He actually left the house believing you were dead."

Jim tried to thank his benefactor, but his heart was too full to speak.

"Come," said Harry, "tell me what has happened since you left Friar's Court."

"There is nothing to tell," said the other. "I tramped to London, sometimes sleeping in the open air, sometimes--when the weather was bad--lodging at way-side inns. At first, I was glad to get here. In a great city like this I felt I could not be recognized and pointed out as a thief. Oh," he burst forth, "you know that I am innocent!"

"I was always sure of it," said Harry. "I can't think how my uncle can believe you guilty."

"Everything was against me," said Jim. "That man, to shield himself, laid a trap for me from which I could not escape. Had I known why he went to the bungalow that night, my story might have been believed."

"I know why he went," said Harry. "I am sure of it. It was to steal the Sunstone."

"The Sunstone!" said Braid. "What's that?"

"It is a very valuable relic that originally came from Persia. No one knows of its value but my uncle, von Hardenberg, and myself. There can be no doubt

that my cousin took it."

Jim Braid sighed.

"I could not prove my innocence," said he.

"Jim, old friend," said Harry, "I promise you shall not remain under this cloud for the rest of your life. I know my cousin to be guilty; I will not rest until I have proved him to be so. He has the Sunstone in his possession, and I intend to do my best to recover it!"

"You will not succeed," said the other, shaking his head.

"Why not?"

"Because he left England weeks ago."

"Left England!" echoed the other.

"Yes. He went away with a man called Peter Klein and a native who wore a turban. They took the boat train from Charing Cross. It was I who carried their boxes on to the taxi. They were going to Old Calabar."

"The West Coast!" cried Harry, jumping to his feet.

Braid was as mystified as ever. Before he knew what was happening, Harry had seized him by the shoulders, and was shaking him as a terrier shakes a rat.

"Don't you see," cried Urquhart, "your innocence is practically proved already. If they have not got the Sunstone, why should they want to go to Africa? They are after the treasure of which the Sunstone is the key. I don't know who the native is, but he is probably some interpreter or guide whom they have hired for the journey. Jim, when my uncle hears of this, I promise you he will take a very different view of the question."

"Then," said Braid, "has this Sunstone got something to do with Africa?"

"Everything!" exclaimed the other. "Here, in Europe, it is valueless; but in certain caves which are situated upon the watershed on the southern side of the Sahara, the thing is worth thousands of pounds. To-morrow morning I will return to my uncle, to Friar's Court, and tell him what you have told me. I will ask him to allow me to follow von Hardenberg to the West Coast, to keep upon his tracks, to run him to ground and accuse him to his face. You will come with me. My uncle will supply us with funds. He would be willing to spend his entire fortune in order to recover the Sunstone."

Harry was so excited that he could scarcely talk coherently. He paced up and down the little sitting-room--three steps this way and three steps that--and every now and again laid his hands upon Jim Braid and shook him violently to emphasize his words.

When Jim awoke the following morning, he was informed that Mr. Urquhart had left early to go back to Friar's Court. He had promised to return the following day. In the meantime, Harry had given instructions that his landlady was to look after his guest. If he wanted anything, he had only to ring the bell.

On the afternoon of the second day Harry returned to London.

"My uncle," he explained, "is inclined to withdraw his verdict, though he will not say openly that he has been guilty of a great injustice. In any case he intends to do everything in his power to get the Sunstone back. He has given me leave to fit out an expedition. Preparations, however, will take some little time. I am to be supplied with letters of introduction to several influential persons on the West Coast. He even said he would come with us himself, were it not that his strength is failing, and he feels he is getting old. Jim, there's hope yet, my lad. You and I together will see this matter through."

Braid held out his hand.

"I can't thank you sufficiently, sir," said he, "for what you have done! You have saved my life twice, and now you mean to save my reputation."

"Don't speak of it," said Harry. "You and I have a great task in front of us; we must stick to each other through thick and thin. I am impatient to be off."

And he had more need of his patience than he thought; for, before they could start upon their journey, war descended upon Europe like a thunderbolt, finding England wholly unprepared.

It was not so with the Germans. Peter Klein and birds of a like feather had been employed for years in every country liable to prove hostile to the Fatherland. Germany had for long intended war, and these rascals--paid in proportion to the information they obtained--were living by the score under the protection of the British flag, within sound of Big Ben, in every colony, dependency, and dominion. Moreover, it has since been proved that the great German Empire did not scruple to employ even her consular and diplomatic servants either as spies themselves or as agents for the purpose of engaging and rewarding informers.

Small wonder, when preparations had been so complete, that Germany had the whip hand at the start, that Belgium, Poland, and Serbia were overrun, and Paris herself saved only at the eleventh hour.

During those early, anxious days, Harry Urquhart was in two minds what to do. He was wishful to serve his country, and could without difficulty have secured a commission within a few weeks of the declaration of war. Braid was also willing to enlist. On talking the matter out, however, with Mr. Langton, it was decided that the quest of the Sunstone was as patriotic a cause as any man could wish for; since, if von Hardenberg succeeded in reaching the Caves of Zoroaster, the wealth that they contained would ultimately find its way to the Fatherland.

But, since there was fighting both in Togoland and the Cameroons, their departure had to be postponed whilst Mr. Langton obtained permission from the War Office authorities for his two protégés to visit the West African scene of operations. All this took time; and it was not until the beginning of October that young Urquhart and Jim Braid found themselves sitting together in a first-class

railway compartment on their way to Southampton.

A few hours afterwards, on a dark windy night, they were on board a ship that rolled and pitched upon its way to Ushant. The Lizard light flashed good-bye from England, and the dark sea, as they knew quite well, contained hidden dangers in the shape of submarines and mines, but the quest of the Sunstone had begun.

CHAPTER VII--Into the Bush

They experienced rough weather in the Bay of Biscay, where the ship pitched and rolled in a confused sea, and the wind howled round Finisterre, which was wrapped in an impenetrable fog.

Two days afterwards they found the blue waters that bound the Morocco coast, after which the heat became excessive.

The ship was bound first for Sierra Leone, and thence to Old Calabar, from which place they intended to strike inland through the bush, after engaging the services of a party of Kru boys to act as carriers.

On these still tropic seas, dazzling in the sunshine, there was no sign of war, except an occasional torpedo-boat destroyer which flew past them at a speed of thirty knots an hour.

At Sierra Leone, Harry betook himself to a certain gentleman holding an influential position in the Civil Service, to whom he had a letter of introduction from his uncle, and who received the boy with courtesy and kindness. It was from that Harry learned that the Germans had been driven back in Togoland, and that active operations were in progress in the valley of the Cameroon River. He himself had travelled far in the interior; and in consequence he was able to give the boy invaluable advice concerning the kit and equipment he would need to take with him upon his expedition. He advised him to strike into the bush from Old Calabar, where he could procure servants and guides; if he went to Victoria he would find his hands tied by those in command of the Expeditionary Force, who had no liking for civilians at the front.

"All the same," he added, "I strongly advise you not to endeavour to enter Maziriland."

Harry smiled.

"I am afraid, sir," said he, "I have no option. My duty takes me there."

"Of course," said the other, "I don't know what this duty may be, but I tell you frankly the country is by no means safe. All the natives are in arms, some purchased by rum by the Germans, others loyal to us. In the old days the Cameroon kings implored the British Government to take the country under its protection. In their own words, they wanted English laws. But the Government took no notice of them until it was too late, until the Germans had forestalled us and taken possession of the country, by buying over the chiefs. If you go into the bush, you run into a thousand dangers: yellow fever, malaria, even starvation, and the natives you encounter may sell you as prisoners to the Germans. Some of them will do anything for drink."

Harry explained that he was prepared to take the gravest risks, since the object of his journey was of more than vital importance, and shortly afterwards took his leave, returning to the ship.

They had brought with them all they needed in the way of provisions, clothing, arms and ammunition; and at Old Calabar they purchased a canoe and engaged the services of six stalwart Kru boys. Harry's idea was to travel up-river, crossing the Cameroon frontier west of Bamenda, and thence striking inland towards the mountains in northern German territory, beyond which the Caves of Zoroaster were said to be. They also interviewed an interpreter, a half-caste Spaniard from Fernando Po, who assured them he could speak every native dialect of the Hinterland, from Lagos to the Congo, as well as English and German. This proved to be no exaggeration. Urquhart was assured that the man was indeed a wonderful linguist, and, moreover, that he could be trusted implicitly as a guide--the more so since he hated the Germans, who had destroyed his 'factory' to make room for a house for a Prussian Governor, who had hoped to rule the West Coast native with the iron discipline of Potsdam.

This man--who called himself "Fernando" after the place of his birth--said that he would never venture across the Cameroons to Maziriland unless his brother was engaged to come with him.

He explained that this brother of his was younger and more agile than himself. Before they became traders they had been hunters, in the old days when the West Coast was practically unexplored, and they had worked together hand-in-glove.

Accordingly, it was agreed that both brothers should join the expedition; and when they presented themselves before Harry Urquhart, the young Englishman could hardly refrain from smiling at their personal appearance.

They were plainly half-castes, and, like most such, considered themselves Europeans, though neither had ever set eyes upon the northern continent. Though

they were almost as black of skin as a Kru boy, they wore large pith helmets, suits of white ducks and blue puttees, being dressed to a button exactly the same. Both wore brown leather belts from which depended revolver holsters and cartridge pouches. The one was robust, wrinkled, broad of chest, and upright; the other, stooping, tall, and abnormally thin. There was a business-like air about them both that appealed to Harry; and this favourable impression was by no means dispelled when the brothers, in quite tolerable English, raved against the Germans, who, they swore, had bought the Cameroons with rum, in order to manage the country to their own profit without regard to the welfare of the natives. It was owing to the German occupation of the Cameroons that Fernando and his brother--who went by the name of Cortes--had been ruined by the State-aided German factories that had sprung up as if by magic in the early 'nineties. Later, they had been accused of inciting the natives to rebellion, heavily fined, and banished from the country.

This increase in numbers necessitated the purchase of a second canoe. Before leaving Calabar they supplemented their commissariat with a new supply of provisions; and, a few days after, it was a small but well-equipped and dauntless expedition that set forth up-river in the sweltering heat, making straight for the heart of the great West African bush and the very stronghold of the enemy's position.

CHAPTER VIII--Danger Ahead

Three weeks later they camped on the river bank not many miles from the German frontier. The heat was terribly oppressive. Thousands of insects droned about their ears. A thick mist hung upon the river like a poison-cloud. They were in the very depths of the great White Man's Grave.

Four days afterwards Fernando deemed it advisable to leave the river valley, and unloading the canoes--which they hid in a mangrove swamp--they began their journey through the bush.

It would be tedious to describe in detail the long weeks that followed or the hardships they had to undergo. One by one the Kru boys deserted them, to find their own way back to the coast. But both Cortes and Fernando proved loyal to

the hilt, and eventually the party came out from the jungle upon the high ground in the central part of the colony.

The country here was savage, inhospitable, and bleak. There was little vegetation save rank mountain grass and withered shrubs in sheltered places. Day by day they advanced with the utmost caution, giving native villages a wide berth and always on the look-out for an ambushade.

Fernando proved himself to be an excellent cook, whereas his younger brother prided himself upon his skill as a runner. It was his custom on the line of march to jump fallen trees and brooks.

In these higher altitudes there was a plenitude of game, whereas in the bush they had been near to starving, and one morning they were crossing a spur of a great cloud-wrapped mountain when Cortes, who had been walking about fifty yards in advance of Harry and Jim, dropped suddenly upon his face, and motioned the two boys to do the same. They had no idea as to what had happened, and suspected that the guide had sighted a party of the enemy.

Crawling on hands and knees, they drew level with the man.

"Goat," said he, pointing towards the mountain.

And there, sure enough, was a species of mountain goat with his great horns branching from the crown of his shaggy head.

"Come," said the man to Harry; "you shoot."

They could not afford to let the beast escape. The flesh of all the wild goats, though perhaps not so good as that of the wild sheep, is by no means unwelcome when one must journey far from civilization in the wilds of the African hills.

Harry adjusted his sights to six hundred yards, and then, drawing in a deep breath, took long and careful aim. Gently he pressed the trigger, the rifle kicked, there came a sharp report, and the bullet sped upon its way. On the instant the beast was seen galloping at breakneck speed down what seemed an almost perpendicular cliff.

"Missed!" cried Harry.

"No," said Cortes. "He's hit--he's wounded. He will not go far."

For a few minutes the members of the party held a hurried consultation. Finally it was decided that Fernando should go on ahead with the camp kit and cooking-utensils, whilst the younger brother accompanied Harry and Jim in pursuit of the wounded goat. They agreed to meet at nightfall at a place known to the brothers.

It took them nearly an hour to scramble across the valley, to reach the place where the animal had been wounded. There, as the guide had predicted, there were drops of blood upon the stones. All that morning they followed the spoor, and about two o'clock in the afternoon they sighted the wounded beast, lying down in the open.

He was still well out of range, and, unfortunately for them, on the windward side. That meant they would have to make a detour of several miles in order to come within range.

For three hours they climbed round the wind, all the time being careful not to show themselves, for the eyes of the wild goat are like those of the eagle. With its wonderful eyesight, its still more wonderful sense of smell, and its ability to travel at the pace of a galloping horse across rugged cliffs and valleys, it is a prize that is not easily gained. When they last saw the animal it was lying down in the same place. They were then at right angles to the wind, about two miles up the valley.

From this point, on the advice of Cortes, they passed into another valley to the west. Here there was no chance of being seen or winded by the beast; and, since it was now possible to walk in an upright position, they progressed more rapidly.

When they had arrived at the spot which the guide judged was immediately above the wounded animal they climbed stealthily up the hill. On the crest-line they sought cover behind great boulders, which lay scattered about in all directions as if they had been hurled down from the skies. Lying on their faces, side by side, Harry with his field-glasses to his eyes, they scanned the valley where they had left their quarry.

Not a sign of it was to be seen. The thing had disappeared as mysteriously as if it had been spirited away.

"He's gone!" said Harry, with a feeling of bitter disappointment.

He was about to rise to his feet, but the half-caste held him down by force.

"Don't get up;" he cried. "Lie still! There are men in the valley yonder."

"Men! Have you seen them?"

"No, I have not seen them," said Cortes. "But the beast saw them, or got their wind. Otherwise he would not have gone."

"It's von Hardenberg, perhaps!" said Harry, turning to Braid, the wish being father to the thought.

Both looked at their guide.

"It is either the man you want," said the guide, "or else it is the Germans."

The wounded animal was now forgotten. They were face to face with the reality of their situation. They had either overtaken von Hardenberg and Peter Klein or else the Germans had received news of their having reached the frontier.

"We'll have to cross the valley," said Harry, "to get back to camp."

"That is the worst of it," said Cortes; "we must rejoin my brother. He will be awaiting us."

He had learnt his English on the Coast. He spoke the language well, but with the strange, clipped words used by the natives themselves, though the man

was half a Spaniard.

"How are we to get there?" asked Jim.

The guide looked at the sun.

"It is too late," said he, "to go by a roundabout way. We must walk straight there. There are many things which cause me to believe that danger is close at hand."

"What else?" asked Harry, who already was conscious that his heart was beating quickly.

"Late last night I saw smoke on the mountains. This morning, before we started, my brother thought he heard a shot, far in the distance. Also," he added, "during the last three days we have seen very little game. Something has scared them away."

"Come," said Harry. "We waste time in words. As it is, we have barely time to get back before nightfall."

As he said this he rose to his feet, and the moment he did so there came the double report of a rifle from far away in the hills, and a bullet cut past him and buried itself in the ground, not fifteen paces from his feet.

"Down," cried the guide, "for your life!"

CHAPTER IX--The Captive

Harry was not slow to obey. He fell flat upon his face, whilst a second bullet whistled over his head.

"Come," said Cortes; "we must escape."

As he uttered these words, he turned upon his heel and ran down the hill, followed by the two boys. The man held himself in a crouching position until he was well over the crest-line. Then he stopped and waited for his companions.

"Who is it?" asked Braid, already out of breath as much from excitement as from running.

"The Germans. They are on our track."

"You are sure of that?" asked Harry.

"Master," said Cortes, "it is not possible to mistake a German bullet. In this part of the world only those natives carry rifles who are paid by Kaiser Wilhelm."

Indeed, for weeks already, they had been in the heart of the enemy's country. The elder guide was some miles away, and, since they could not cross the valley, they would have to make a detour; which meant that they could not possibly rejoin Fernando before nightfall. By then, for all they knew, they might find him lying in his own blood, their provisions and their reserve ammunition stolen.

Harry looked at Cortes, who seemed to be thinking, standing at his full height, his fingers playing with his chin.

"We must not desert your brother," said the boy.

"I am thinking," said the guide, "it will be easier for him to reach us than for you and your friend to go to him. My brother and I are hunters; we can pass through the bush in silence; we can travel amid the rocks like snakes. I could cross that valley crawling on my face, and the eye of an eagle would not see me. As for you, you are Englishmen; you have not lived your lives in the mountains and the bush; you do not understand these things."

He said this with some scorn in his voice. There was something about the man--despite his European clothes--that was fully in keeping with the aspect of their surroundings, which were savage, relentless, and cruel. He went on in a calm voice, speaking very slowly:

"In this valley we are safe," said he. "I know the country well. Yonder," and he pointed to the north, "there is a forest that lies upon the hill-side like a mantle. I will guide you. It will take us about two hours to get there. Then I will leave you. You will be quite safe; for many of the trunks of the trees are hollow, and should the Germans come, you can hide. I will go alone to my brother and bring him back with me."

They set forward without delay, sometimes climbing, sometimes walking, on the mountain-side. About four o'clock in the afternoon they sighted the forest of which the man had spoken. It opened out into a mangrove swamp, thousands of feet below them, where the heat hung like a fog.

Among the trees they found themselves in a kind of twilight. By then the sun was setting; but as the daylight dwindled a great moon arose. Cortes led them to a place, on the verge of a deep ravine, where there was an old tree with a hollow trunk that looked as if it had been struck by lightning.

"You and your friend will remain here," said the man to Harry. "I will be as quick as I can, but in any case I cannot be back until midnight. If I do not return by then, you will know that I am dead; then--if you are wise--you will go back to Calabar. If the Germans come, you will hide." And he pointed to the hollow tree.

Without another word he set forward on his way, gliding down the face of the living rock like some gigantic lizard.

The two boys found themselves in a place romantic but terrible. On every side they were surrounded by the impenetrable hills. The trees of the forest stood

forth in the semi-darkness like great, ghostly giants. Somewhere near at hand a mountain stream roared and thundered over the rocks. The breeze brought to their nostrils the smell of the swamp lower down the valley. The hollow tree stood on the edge of the bush. A few yards away was the ravine, the bottom of which was wide and bare and stony.

Throughout the earlier part of the night they possessed their souls in patience. It was stiflingly hot after the cool mountain air.

Harry looked at his watch. It was midnight. There was no sign of the brothers.

Suddenly they heard a stone shifted from its place somewhere in the forest to go rolling down into the ravine. Both stood motionless and expectant.

"I heard something," said Braid.

"So did I," said Harry.

Again a stone was moved, this time nearer than before. Something was approaching through the bush. If this were an enemy they would have small chance of escaping, for the side of the ravine was inaccessible; it was like a precipice.

They waited in suspense, and presently to the great gnarled roots of the very tree by which they were standing, there crawled a dying, wounded mountain goat.

It died almost as it reached them. Indeed, it was almost a miracle that the animal had lived as long as it had, for Harry's bullet had penetrated its chest.

The long night passed in waiting, and still there was no sign of the half-caste brothers. It was then that they fully realized for the first time the extreme danger of their mission, that they were alone in the heart of a country which was almost unexplored, cut off from their friends and civilization, with no chance of succour and little of returning in safety to the coast.

"Jim," said Harry, and his voice was husky, "I wonder if we shall ever get out of this alive."

"I can't say, sir," answered Braid; "but I'm sure of this: if we have to die, we'll make a fight of it, at least."

It was then that a sound came to their ears that caused them to hold their breath. It was a loud word of command in the German language, and which, moreover, came from not far away.

They lay down flat upon their faces. Screened by a clump of long grass, they were able to look down into the ravine, where they beheld a company of German native troops with whom were two or three European officers and several German noncommissioned officers. The men marched well in step, keeping their dressing and acting promptly and smartly at each word of command. Except for their black skins and coarse negro features they might have learned their drill on the parade-grounds of Potsdam and Berlin.

The two boys regarded them in consternation, mingled with amazement--

due to the fact that in the centre of the company was a European whose hands were bound behind his back and around whose neck was a kind of halter.

Jim Braid recognized this man at once. It was Peter Klein, the spy.

CHAPTER X--When All was Still

Among the native troops was a man who was not dressed in uniform, who was tattooed from head to foot, and who wore upon his head an abundance of coloured feathers. They learned afterwards that he was a medicine or "fetish" man--and "fetish worship" is the curse of the Dark Continent, from Ashanti to the Zambesi. The medicine-men, who profess to practise witchcraft, are far more powerful than the majority of the native kings. At their bidding innocent people are often put to death, which enables them to use their powers for bribery and corruption.

In the centre of the ravine, immediately below the place where the two boys were hiding, the officer in command called a halt. When the men had fallen out and released their packs from their shoulders, the witch-doctor addressed them in an excited, high-pitched voice. Neither Harry nor Braid could understand a word of what he said, but his grimaces and gesticulations were so expressive that they could have no doubt that he was performing some kind of religious ceremony.

It was evident that the party intended to pitch their camp in the ravine, for several men under the command of one of the non-commissioned officers set about collecting wood with which to make a fire.

The boys knew not what course to take. Their first inclination was to take to their heels, seeking refuge in the forest. Then they remembered that if they did this there would be small chance of their being found by Cortes, who had promised to return to the ravine. As silently as possible they crawled on hands and knees to the hollow tree, and hid themselves in the trunk.

There they remained for hour after hour. From that position they were just able to see into the gorge. The party had split up into three groups: the German officers sat alone; the European noncommissioned officers formed a ring around a smaller fire; whereas the natives were congregated around the fetish-man.

Peter Klein sat like a figure of stone, a sentry with bayonet fixed standing over him. His lips were bloodless, his eyes staring, his face like that of a ghost. From time to time the Germans looked at him and laughed. For all that, they repeatedly offered him food; but he refused to eat, though now his hands had been unbound.

After a while many of the men disposed themselves for sleep, lying down upon the bare rocks about the embers of the fire. The officer in command--a stout major with a bristling moustache--gave orders that the prisoner's hands should again be bound. Whereupon a sergeant propped the prisoner up, with his back to the side of the ravine, making it perfectly plain--even to the boys who could not understand the German language--that, if he endeavoured to escape, they would not hesitate to kill him.

The sentry was not posted for the night on the side of the ravine on which were the two boys, but on the other side, overlooking the valley to the east. It was apparently from this direction that the Germans seemed to fear for their safety.

Harry thought the matter out. If the two brothers were alive, he could not think why they had not returned. It was now past one o'clock, and Cortes had said he would be back certainly before twelve.

The night passed in the bush in solemn tranquillity, save for the droning of myriads of insects from the mangrove swamp and the gurgling sound of the river. Hour by hour the moon mounted in the skies above the hill-tops, which were capped by mist. The two boys were squashed together in the tree-trunk. Braid, it seemed, had gone to sleep in a standing position. He was breathing heavily.

Stealthily Harry left his hiding-place and dropped down upon hands and knees. Cautiously he crept to the edge of the ravine and looked over. To the boy's surprise, he observed that not only the Germans and the native soldiers, but also the sentry, were sound asleep. They lay in huddled attitudes around the dying fires.

With his back against the rock was Peter Klein. As Harry watched him the man moved and heaved a sigh. Presently he groaned.

Harry Urquhart was one who was quick to think. This man, Klein, was a spy, one fit to be despised, and moreover a German, an enemy of his country. And yet, for some reason or other, Klein was a prisoner in the hands of his own countrymen. Von Hardenberg, perhaps, was not so far away. These were questions that could possibly be answered by Peter Klein himself, who might be disposed to speak in gratitude for his deliverance.

There was only one way in which the prisoner could be rescued. It was not possible for Harry to descend the sides of the ravine, neither was it possible for Klein, even had his hands and legs not been bound, to climb up the cliffs.

As stealthily as before, Urquhart crawled back into the wood, until he came

to a place where there was a long, rope-like creeper--one of those vegetable parasites which are so common in the forests of the tropics. To cut this near the roots and tear it from the tree to which it clung so tenaciously was the work of not many minutes, and Harry was in possession of what to all intents and purposes was a very useful rope.

With this he repaired in haste to the edge of the ravine, where he tied the end of it to the trunk of a tree. That done, hand over hand he let himself down to the bottom.

Stepping over the forms of the sleeping soldiers he approached the captive, and with his jack-knife cut the bonds that bound Klein's feet and hands.

"Now," he whispered in the man's ear, "climb, and you are safe!"

The spy was still so terrified and so weakened from exhaustion that it was all he could do to walk. With faltering steps he stumbled towards the dangling rope, and Harry feared that he would fall and wake the sleeping Germans.

Peter Klein took hold of the swinging creeper and did his best to climb. Presently he looked round at Harry with an expression of despair upon his face.

"I can't do it!" he groaned in broken English.

"You must," said the boy. "Your life depends upon it. Once you get to the top you are safe. They cannot follow you. They have no rope, and will be obliged to go a long way round."

These words had the desired effect upon the spy. Fear, on occasion, is a great stimulant; it sometimes leads a man to perform prodigies of strength that he could never accomplish in calmer moments. Hand over hand the man scrambled to the top of the ravine, and there lay down, panting and exhausted.

Harry followed quickly. At the top he hauled up the creeper, and then looked down again.

The soldiers were still asleep. The commanding officer himself was snoring like a pig.

Shaking in all his limbs, Peter Klein rose to his feet and seized Harry by the hand.

"Heaven reward you!" he exclaimed. "You have saved my life, for I verily believe those villains would have shot me."

CHAPTER XI--A Shot from the Clouds

It is a remarkable fact that all this time Jim Braid had been sound asleep. Once inside the trunk of the hollow, shattered tree, he had found himself unable to overcome a feeling of drowsiness which by degrees completely got the better of him. Klein, on the other hand, had apparently received such a shock to his nervous system that in spite of his extreme exhaustion he found it impossible to sleep. Also he had a dread of being left alone. He implored Harry, who had led him some way back into the forest, to remain at his side till dawn.

For the time being, they had nothing to fear from the German soldiers, who were at the bottom of the ravine and unable to reach them. Still, they could not continue their march, since without the guides they were lost and would not know which way to go. But so long as they remained where they were, there was always a chance that one, or both, of the brothers would return.

"Tell me," asked Urquhart, "how is it that I find you a prisoner in the hands of those who should be your friends?"

"It is a very simple story," said Peter Klein. "We left Dualla a few weeks ago. The party consisted of Captain von Hardenberg, our guide--an Arab sheikh--two native carriers, and myself. The Governor of Dualla wished von Hardenberg to join the force which is to oppose the British. Hardenberg was given an important command. But, since he had other business to attend to--which he himself considered of greater importance--in plain words, he deserted; and we endeavoured to penetrate the bush.

"For some days we journeyed without event. Then we discovered that we were tracked, and were obliged to fly for our lives.

"One night a shot was fired into our camp. And after that, day by day, we were harassed and tormented, until two nights ago a raid was made upon our bivouac. They came upon us from all sides at once. We were outnumbered by twenty to one. No course lay open to us but flight. The two natives went one

way. They rushed into a large party of soldiers, and there is every reason to believe they laid down their lives. Von Hardenberg and the sheikh took to the hills, climbing the bare slope, and I think they managed to escape. As for myself, I fled downhill with a score of native soldiers at my heels.

"All yesterday I was pursued. I fled for my life across interminable valleys, across the hills, striving to reach the bush, where I knew I would be safe. Sometimes I found myself buried in the gloom of forests; at others I stood upon the edge of precipices so deep that the clouds were at my feet.

"Late last evening I was overtaken. They bound my hands behind my back and scourged me with a whip. They gave me to understand they would eventually put me to a traitor's death; but they thought more of von Hardenberg and Sheikh Bayram than they did of me. They were for ever asking me which way he had gone--just as if I could tell them what I did not know myself! When they brought me to the ravine, yonder, I was too fatigued and too disturbed in mind to sleep. And then you saved me at the eleventh hour. That is all my story."

Harry was silent for some moments.

"You have not told me," he said, "why you have come to this forsaken part of the world, or why von Hardenberg--who is my cousin--deserted from the Germans?"

Klein lowered his eyes. It seemed he was not incapable of feeling ashamed.

"The Sunstone," said he, quite quietly.

"My cousin has the Sunstone in his possession?"

"I have seen it," answered Klein. "He carries it upon his person. He never lets it out of his possession. He would not even let me touch it. He has had a special pocket made for it in the inside of his coat, on the left-hand side."

"You must be frank with me," said Harry.

"You saved my life," said the other.

"Then listen to the true story of the Sunstone. You doubtless know that my cousin stole it from my uncle, but you are perhaps ignorant of the fact that, to cover his own guilt, he wrongfully accused one who was innocent. I presume my cousin went to you and explained that, once he got to Maziriland with the Sunstone in his possession, he had acquired riches beyond all dreams. I suppose you agreed to go with him, to share and share alike? I suppose, also, that, in spite of the fact that our nations are at war, you consider the Sunstone of far greater importance than your Fatherland?"

"To my shame," said Peter Klein, "that is--or was--the truth. I sold my honour for gold long ago. I would not say that in Europe, in London or Berlin, but here we are in the very midst of death, and all things are different--or perhaps, we see all things with very different eyes."

"At least," said Harry, "you are honest now."

"I am a coward," the man confessed.

"You must see," Urquhart went on, "that you have no moral right to this money, even should the treasure be discovered. However, I have not come here to recover the treasure, so much as to prevent it from falling into the hands of the enemies of my country. I am determined to capture the Sunstone, be the risk and danger what it may be."

Klein shook his head.

"He will not part with it," said he. "He is a desperate man."

"I will make him part with it," cried Harry, "once I run the rascal to earth."

"He is a desperate man," repeated the other. "He dare not return to Germany. He would be court-martialled, and probably shot. He will not part with the Sunstone at a lesser price than his life."

"I am sorry for him," said Harry, "because he is doubly a traitor. When the guest of the British nation he was to all intents and purposes a spy; he swindled you; and now, in the midst of war, he proves himself a traitor once again."

Peter Klein was silent, his thin fingers playing nervously. The strain of the past few days had seriously affected his health; he was suffering from a kind of St. Vitus's dance. He was never still for a moment.

"It is strange," said he, "that you think so much of the Sunstone. Long since I had forgotten all about it. I have now but one idea--to get back to Europe, if I can. I dare not return to my home, which is in Frankfort. I intend to end my days in Denmark."

It was then that somewhere in the forest, near at hand, a twig broke. Both sprang instantly to their feet.

A dark figure came suddenly out of the thickets, and Urquhart, with his finger upon the trigger of his revolver, was about to fire, when he was arrested by a voice.

"Is that you, Mr. Harry?"

It was the voice of Jim Braid.

"What is it, Jim?"

Braid came forward in the darkness. The moon was now low in the heavens. In the east, through the tree-tops, there was a steel-blue arc of light, heralding the approach of day. It was as if even the abundant vegetation of the jungle was itself awakening after sleep. When he was quite close to Harry, Braid took him by the arm.

"I have news for you," said he. "There's an uproar in the ravine. The Germans have discovered their prisoner has escaped."

"Here he is," said Harry, making a motion of the hand towards Peter Klein.

"Here! How did he get here?"

"There's no time for explanations now," said Harry.

"You're right, sir," answered Jim. "We're in danger if we stay!"

"We would be in greater danger still," said the other, "if we endeavoured to escape. After all, this is the last place they would think of searching. It would never occur to them that the prisoner had climbed up the side of the ravine."

There was the strongest common sense in this. Indeed, a few minutes later they had ample proof that Harry was perfectly right. Klein remained behind, whilst the two boys crawled back to the edge of the gorge and thence looked down into the bivouac.

The daylight was growing apace. Step by step the dawn mounted in the heavens, the shadows fled from the valleys, and the bush became alive with the songs of thousands of birds.

And then they witnessed a tragedy such as neither ever wished to see again. The native sentry, who had fallen asleep upon his post, was led with trembling knees and shaking lips before the major in command, who, after a few savage questions, hurled at the man like scraps of meat to a dog, sentenced him to be shot. And then and there the sentence was carried out before their eyes.

After that the major gathered his men together and divided them into two parties, evidently with the idea of searching both ends of the ravine. And now occurred one of the most strangely dramatic things of which we have to tell.

The commanding officer was giving final instructions to his officers and sergeants. He stood upon a large boulder. His subordinates were listening to his words with silent respect. He spoke in a husky, guttural voice, from time to time shivering as if he suffered from fever. Suddenly, he flung both hands above his head and uttered a piercing cry. Simultaneously, there came the sharp report of a rifle from beyond the ravine, and the German major fell forward on his face.

CHAPTER XII--The Mystery of the Running Man

On the instant the greatest disorder prevailed. As at a stroke the iron discipline of Potsdam vanished, and despite his uniform and training, and the curses of the

German non-commissioned officers, the Cameroon native became the untutored savage once again.

In the panic of the moment the native soldiers took to their heels, evidently under the impression that they had been surprised by a British force. And, as they ran, shots rang out repeatedly from somewhere in the midst of the shrubbery that grew on the farther side of the gorge.

There was no question that the invisible man who commanded the ravine from his hiding-place upon the mountain-side was a marksman of repute. He fired in haste at running figures, and more than once his bullets found their mark. The German-trained soldiers vanished as by a conjuring-trick, disappearing round an angle of the gorge.

All this had happened in the space of a few seconds. Harry, taking his field-glasses from their case, scanned the mountain that overtopped the ravine, endeavouring to discover the form of the mysterious and terrible marksman who had created such alarm.

Nowhere was any living soul to be seen. The mountain-side was as silent as the grave. In the forest itself, hundreds of birds welcomed the dazzling sunlight with the gladness of their songs.

"Who was it?" asked Jim.

"It must have been Cortes or Fernando," answered Harry, "but I can see no sign of them. I expect one or the other will show himself in a minute."

They waited for several minutes. At last Urquhart could bear the suspense no longer. He lifted his hands to his mouth and let out a long-drawn shout.

His voice was echoed from the hills, which were now wrapped in clouds, but no voice came back in answer.

"I can't understand it," he exclaimed.

Braid admitted that the whole thing was something of a mystery, for which he could offer no sort of explanation.

And then, on a sudden, they saw a white-clad figure dashing over the rocks. It was a man who came down from the mountain-side, fleet and sure of foot. Upon his head he wore a turban. He was dressed in robes of flowing white, and in his hand he carried a rifle.

Harry directed his field-glasses upon this extraordinary figure. Beyond the fact that he was a tall man with a great black beard, he could see little or nothing, by reason of the prodigious pace at which the man was travelling. One thing, however, was perfectly certain: that this man--who apparently was the marksman who had so effectively scattered the Germans--was not one of the half-caste guides.

The running man came closer and closer, and the boys thought at first that he was about to approach to within speaking distance of themselves. But he turned

off sharply to the left and disappeared in a belt of trees almost as suddenly as he had come.

They waited for some minutes, thinking that he would show up again; but that was the last they saw of him for some days, and it was not until then that they discovered who he was. He came and vanished like a thunderbolt that spreads destruction in its path. His rifle had spoken at dawn, and almost every shot had been the signal for the death of a human being. He came, and killed, and vanished. He was a three-day mystery of the wild hills of the German Cameroons.

Throughout that morning they knew not what to do. They were without guides; they had practically no provisions; and they had not the least idea where they were or in which direction they should go.

Soon after midday the two boys held a consultation, admitting Peter Klein to their counsels. But the ex-spy was no help to them; he was incapable of giving advice. They told him of the man they had seen that morning, the white figure on the mountain-side, but he only gaped and shook his head. It was as if the physical and moral strain he had undergone had actually made him mad.

Harry clung to hope as a drowning man lays hold upon a spar. He pointed out that they were helpless without their guides, and argued that it was wisest to remain where they were, in case either of the half-castes should repair to their meeting-place and find them gone.

That night they lit a fire in the forest, and seated around this they roasted some bananas--or rather plantains--they had found growing in the bush. After they had eaten these, Harry and Klein lay down to sleep, Jim Braid consenting to keep watch during the earlier hours of the night.

When the moon had risen, and a mighty stillness reigned in the forest, Jim Braid, who sat upon a boulder with his rifle upon his knees, heard on a sudden a short cough immediately behind him. He turned quickly in alarm.

Both Harry and Klein were sound asleep, and, seated on the ground immediately between them, calmly biting the end from a cheroot, was the figure of Fernando.

"You!" cried Braid, as soon as he could find his voice.

"Even myself," said the half-bred Spaniard. "Had I been a German, I could have killed all three of you."

"You were as silent as a snake," said the other.

The man chuckled.

"Before I was a trader," said he, "I was a hunter of big game."

It was then that Braid awakened Harry and told him the news. The boy was heartily glad to see the guide, whom he had certainly believed to be dead.

"And your brother?" he asked.

"My brother is safe," said the man. "You did wisely to remain here. You

could never have got back to Calabar. The country swarms with German troops."

"Then what are we to do?" asked Harry.

"Go north," said Fernando. "Go north at every risk, to Maziriland. My brother has already struck out across the mountains. He and I know of a place where they will never find us. I have come here to take you there. Cortes awaits us. We must start at once. There is no time to lose."

CHAPTER XIII--The Black Dog

After they had explained to Fernando how it had come about that Peter Klein had joined their party, they set forward in a northerly direction, guided by the half-caste. They passed through the forest and crossed a wide valley. Thence they traversed a great ridge of hills, at the end of which they came to a mountain-top. This they began to ascend. There were many places so steep and stony that they were often obliged to go on all fours, and Klein, who was both weak and nervous, stood in constant danger of his life.

Finally they gained the summit. The top of the mountain was shaped like a bowl. It was evidently the crater of an extinct volcano. In one place an enormous rock had a cleft in it like a sword-cut, and through this Fernando led them. The cleft was so narrow that they were obliged to walk sideways, like crabs. After a time the passage opened, and they found themselves in a small arena in the centre of which a spring of water bubbled to the surface. After the heat of the forest the air was delightfully refreshing and cool.

When they had drunk their fill the guide took them to a place where a boulder as round as a football and about five times the size, lay upon the ground. This he rolled away, not without difficulty, and underneath it was a hole about three feet across, like one of those "blowholes" which can be seen in some of the caves of Cornwall or South Wales.

Fernando let himself down through the hole until he was hanging by his hands; then he dropped, and they heard him alight upon the ground about ten feet beneath. Braid followed next, and then Klein; Harry was the last to descend into the darkness.

Below, they found themselves in what was evidently a pocket in the side of the crater, a great rent caused by some volcanic disturbance in bygone times. The place was a kind of low and narrow gallery. The moonlight was admitted through several cracks in the walls.

At the farthest end of the gallery a fire burnt, and at this a man was seated, whom they found to be Cortes, the younger of the two guides. When he saw them he rose to his feet without a word, walked deliberately to the wall, and thrust his head into one of the fissures.

The two boys watched him in amazement. The man--who, it will be remembered, was extremely slim and agile--wriggled like a snake. Gradually, it became manifest that he was squeezing himself through with the greatest difficulty. First his head, then his shoulders, then his body, and finally his legs and feet disappeared through the wall.

"Where is he going?" asked Harry, turning to Fernando.

"He has gone to replace the stone upon the hole through which we came. My brother is no fool. Life in the bush has taught us many things."

After a while the younger brother returned, squeezing himself again through the narrow opening. When he came to the firelight there were places upon his back and shoulders where his clothes had been torn, and where the rents were stained with blood. He did not seem to mind these wounds in the least, but laughed when Harry pointed them out.

"Here," said Fernando, "we are safe, and here we must stay for some days, until the Germans have left the district. They will never find us; no one could ever find us."

"We have food?" asked Harry.

Cortes pointed to a corner where lay the dead body of an antelope.

"I killed that this morning," said he. "Cooked, and in this cool climate, it will keep for days. Besides, my brother and I can hunt upon the mountain; but you and your two friends must remain here until the Germans have left the district. Then we can continue our march towards Maziriland."

In his heart Harry Urquhart felt more than gratitude towards these strange, gallant men. They were loyal, faithful, courageous, and full of infinite resource. They seemed to love adventure for its own sake, after the manner of the old Spanish explorers--the followers of Columbus--whose blood ran in their veins.

For three days the party remained in this singular hiding-place. Every morning the brothers went out to hunt. Harry and Braid did not mind the monotony of their temporary imprisonment, first, because they knew that this was their only place of safety, and, secondly, because they were glad enough of a few days' rest after all the exertions and privations they had undergone in the wilderness of the bush.

At midnight on the third night, something that was well-nigh miraculous occurred. All were asleep except Harry Urquhart, who was doing his turn on watch. He was walking to and fro along the gallery, and had reached a spot immediately underneath the hole which was covered by the stone, when suddenly a great shaft of moonlight shot down into the cave.

It was a moment before the boy realized what had happened--that the stone had been rolled away. Before he had time to give the alarm, to cry out, or bring his rifle to his shoulder, the stone was rolled back again, and all was dim and silent as before.

He ran to the fire and woke up his companions. All sprang to their feet. In a few breathless words Harry told them what had happened. Jim Braid seized a lighted brand from the fire, which was burning brightly, and carried this to the end of the gallery. Sure enough the stone was back in its place.

"Are you sure," he asked, "you were not dreaming?"

"I can swear to it," said Harry.

"What's that?" cried Braid, pointing to something white that lay upon the floor.

Harry Urquhart stooped, and to his amazement picked up a letter, written in German, which was addressed to:

"Peter Klein, Coward"

Here was a greater mystery than ever.

"This is apparently for you," said Harry, giving the letter to Klein. The whole thing was amazing.

Klein opened the envelope with shaking hands. Then he took it to the other end of the gallery, and, kneeling down, read it by the light of the fire.

Presently he returned and handed the letter to Fernando, who had a fair knowledge of the German language.

"Read that," said he. "How did it come here?" The man was as white as a ghost.

The writer had evidently been at some pains to disguise his handwriting. The letter was written in capital letters with a violet indelible pencil. The message, when translated, was as follows:--

"I have something of importance to say to you. Leave your hiding-place at once and alone."

"It is from von Hardenberg," said Klein. "He orders me to return to him--at once."

"Orders you! And you will go?"

"I have no option. I dare not refuse."

"Dare not!"

At that a groan escaped from the man's lips, and he threw out his hands with a gesture of despair.

"You do not understand," he cried. "In London that man was in my power, but in this wild country I am at his mercy; for there is one with him who is pitiless and terrible, who carries his crimes as a jester jangles his bells."

"Whom do you mean?" asked Harry.

"I mean the Arab sheikh. That man is a demon. There is nothing he would not do for money. There were times when I travelled with them when I thought that they meant to kill me. When I fell asleep at the camp-fire, I could see in my dreams the cruel, piercing eyes of the sheikh fixed upon me; they were like coals of living fire. Fool that I was to come here!" he broke out in despair. "Why did I not stay where I was safe?"

Fernando, turning to Harry, cut short the man's whining words.

"I must know the truth," said he. "How did that letter come here? Who wrote it?"

"It was written by my cousin," said Harry, "the man whom we follow; but whether he himself brought it here or the rascal who serves him, I am quite unable to say. At any rate," he added, with a smile, "your hiding-place has been discovered."

The half-caste returned to the fire, where he sat down, holding out his hands to warm them. He remained thus for some time, seemingly deep in thought; then he returned to Harry.

"Just now," said he, "I heard mention of a sheikh. Is the man's name by any chance Bayram; for he is a devil, in truth."

"That is the name of the man who is with von Hardenberg."

"I did not know," said the other, and remained silent for a long time.

"You did not know?" repeated Harry.

"When I agreed to come with you I did not know that the Black Dog of the Cameroons--as I and my brother call him--was to be our enemy. In all the hills and plains and forests of this huge, amazing continent, from the Sahara to Kilima-Njaro, from the Niger to the Nile, there is no man more greatly to be feared than the Black Dog of the Cameroons. He knows neither pity nor fear. There is hardly a valley in these mountains with which he is not acquainted. Small wonder he discovered our hiding-place! He is a foe who cannot be despised. Single-handed he could keep an army of natives at bay. Almost every cartridge in his bandolier, almost every bullet in the chamber of his rifle, means the life's blood of a human being. At one time he was the richest slave-trader in Africa. But I heard the English hunted him down, and that he was starving and penniless in London."

"It was he!" cried Harry, turning sharply to Braid. "He was the man we saw that morning on the mountain-side, who fired into the German bivouac at dawn."

"The sheikh was the man," said the guide. "You should have told me before."

"I blame myself," said Harry. "I know now that I can trust you and your brother with even more than life."

Fernando continued to speak in slow deliberate tones.

"If we are to come out of this alive," said he, "you will do well to take me into your counsels. Moreover, you must follow my advice. I and the Black Dog have an old score to pay. For myself, I am determined to be a debtor no longer." Then, without changing his voice, he turned calmly to Peter Klein. "You must go back to von Hardenberg," said he.

"No, no! not that!" Klein almost shrieked.

Fernando smiled grimly. He might have been one of his own hard-hearted ancestors, presiding at the Spanish Inquisition.

"I fear to go!" cried Klein, his terror stamped on every feature. "They will kill me! I know they will!"

Fernando laughed aloud.

"You will most certainly be killed," said he, "if you refuse to go. The Black Dog has marked you for his own."

At these words the spy fell down upon his knees at Harry Urquhart's feet.

"Keep me with you!" he pleaded. "Give me your protection! It is to the advantage of those men to kill me. They brought me here to do away with my life. They do not intend that I shall live to claim my share of the treasure, if they should ever find it."

Harry, somewhat roughly, told the man to get to his feet. Klein was an arrant coward. Harry felt little pity for the man; yet he could not find it in his heart to support Fernando's heartless verdict.

"You have little right to demand our sympathy," said he. "You are an enemy to my country and a spy; you are even a traitor to the rascals whom formerly you were pleased to serve. You have merited the most severe penalty which a state of war allows."

He was about to go on, when the man, losing all control of himself, seized him by both hands and begged him to be merciful.

"I renounce everything!" he cried. "I admit my guilt, and ask you to forgive me. I will give up all claim to a share in the treasure. I swear to be faithful to you, if you will only get me out of this alive."

"We do not think of the treasure," said Urquhart. "We are here to establish the innocence of an injured man and to checkmate von Hardenberg."

"It was he who stole the Sunstone," uttered Klein.

"I know that," said Harry. "That is why we have followed him. He may have

the Black Dog of the Cameroons to aid him, but we have these two gallant fellows, who do not seem to know what it is to fear, to hesitate, or to give up hope."

He half turned, and with a motion of the hand indicated the two brothers, who were seated side by side.

Fernando slowly shook his head.

"As you will," said he. "You have yet to learn that the Cameroons is no place for clemency. I had a plan to trick the Black Dog. It was a cruel plan perhaps. I meant to sacrifice this cur like a kid tied to a stake to snare a tiger. However, let that pass. From to-night, I warn you fairly, we will be even in greater danger than before. We have an enemy to reckon with in the sheikh. At this very moment he waits on the hill-side for his victim." Fernando pointed to Peter Klein.

"He means to take my life!" cried Klein, who was now pacing to and fro, wringing his hands like one demented. "The moment they saw I was likely to be of no use to them, that I was a coward who could neither handle a rifle nor do a long day's march without fatigue, they schemed to do away with me. And what a place for a crime, these unknown, savage hills! In these parts a human life is of no more importance than that of a mosquito."

The man was overwrought, his nerves had been sadly shaken. He was on the verge of lunacy with panic and alarm.

And yet, what he said was obviously the truth. To von Hardenberg his presence was worse than useless, a mere encumbrance on the line of march. In all probability Fernando was right; the Black Dog waited on the hill-side to fall upon the poor, blind fool whom avarice had led so far from the land where he could spy and inform in safety.

The two guides had listened to this dialogue with evident interest and not a little amusement at the expense of Klein. It was Fernando who again broke in upon their talk.

"We will test the sheikh," said he. "We will soon find out his intentions."

At that he turned to his brother, and for some minutes the two spoke in Spanish. After a while it was Cortes who approached Klein and touched him on the arm.

"Get out of your clothes," said he. "I intend to wear them."

Peter Klein was glad enough of the chance of disguising his identity. Cortes put on the tattered white ducks, torn in a score of places by the thorn-trees in the bush, the pith helmet and the leather leggings, and then returned to the fire.

There, he loaded his revolver and the magazine of his Lee-Metford carbine. That done, without a word to his brother, he squeezed himself through the crack in the wall, and disappeared beyond it.

CHAPTER XIV--Buried Alive!

They waited for many minutes in absolute silence. Peter Klein was seated at the fire. There also was Fernando, who appeared to have fallen asleep in a sitting position. As for the two boys, they remained near the opening through which the man had passed, straining their ears to catch the slightest sound without.

Presently there came the sharp report of a shot. Then all was silent again.

Fernando immediately sprang to his feet and walked towards the boys. He must have been sleeping lightly, or else feigning slumber.

"My brother," said he, "is dead."

"Dead!"

Both Harry and Braid uttered the word in a single breath.

"That," said the man, "was the rifle of the sheikh."

"How do you know?" asked Harry.

"For a very simple reason," said the other. "There were two reports, therefore the shot was fired in this direction. If a man fires away from you, you hear but one report, which is like the crack of a whip. But if he fires toward you, you hear two reports, each one of which resembles the 'pop' of a cork. The shot was fired this way. The trigger was pressed by the Black Dog, whose bullet seldom misses its mark. Therefore, in all probability, my brother is gone."

"And you speak of it so calmly!" uttered Braid.

Fernando smiled. "With us who live on the Coast," said he, "death is an easy matter. Sooner or later we all die; some by murder, some by malaria, some by Black Jack, which is the most deadly fever in the world. Our graves are in the bush. What does it matter whether or not a bullet finds its mark?"

The two boys were astonished. They could not understand this strange man's views of life and death.

"And you have sacrificed your brother's life," asked Harry, "merely to prove that the Black Dog of the Cameroons intended to murder Klein?"

Fernando shook his head.

"I would have gone myself," he answered, "had that been possible. As it is, I can live, at least, for revenge."

The full significance of the thing burst upon Harry Urquhart.

"A wasted life!" he cried.

"Oh no!" said the man; "a life is never wasted--for the truth."

After that they were silent; they remained standing close together by the opening in the wall. Harry felt as if a heavy weight had been placed upon his heart.

Without, through the fissures in the wall, they could see the moonshine and the stars. A soft wind which moaned across the desolate and rugged heights was blowing upon the mountain.

Presently they were startled by the sound of a voice--a voice that spoke in a whisper.

"I am wounded," said the voice, "I am wounded almost to death. Fernando, my brother, hold out a hand to me, that I may speak to you before I die."

Harry was about to move to the opening, when the elder guide fiercely thrust him back.

"Do you suffer great pain?" asked Fernando, speaking tenderly, as he approached the fissure on tiptoe.

"Give me your hand," came the answer in a weak, breathless voice.

Instead of a hand, suddenly Fernando thrust his rifle through the opening and fired. The loud report echoed in the shallow vault. A strong smell of cordite was driven to their nostrils.

Without, there was a shriek. Harry rushed to the opening and looked through. He saw a white figure flying in the moonlight like a ghost. Fernando--the half-bred Spaniard--threw back his head and laughed the laugh of a fiend.

"What does all this mean?" cried Braid, turning fiercely upon the man.

"That was no more my brother," said the guide, "than the dog-fox is brother to the eagle. That man was the sheikh--the Black Dog himself."

"It was your brother's voice," said Harry.

"Indeed!" said the man. "I should know my brother's voice. I tell you once again my brother is dead. The Black Dog slew him; and then, recognizing the man he had killed, he guessed that I, too, was with you, and he came here to kill me, imitating my brother's voice, practising the cunning which has made him feared from the Niger to the Congo. And he has gone with a bullet in his chest."

"You did not kill him?" asked Braid.

"No. He fled, realizing that his trick had failed. But because he killed my brother, Cortes, whom I love, I swear now by the saints that I will avenge my brother's death, that I will send the Black Dog to the shades. Henceforward it is his rifle against mine, his treachery against my wits; it is the fox against the serpent."

All this time they had forgotten something of superlative importance. When

events of startling magnitude occur in such quick succession it sometimes happens that the obvious is overlooked. And strange to relate, it was Peter Klein--who hitherto had seemed quite incapable of thinking for himself--who was the first to realize the exceeding gravity of their situation. On a sudden he rushed at Fernando like a maniac, and seized him by the arm.

"You say," he cried, "you are sure your brother is dead?"

The man bowed his head.

"Then, if he is dead, by Heaven, we are buried alive!"

CHAPTER XV--The Valley of the Shadow

The truth came upon them all in the nature of a shock. They could not think how it was that they had overlooked so simple a deduction, so obvious a fact.

Cortes, by reason of the extreme slimness of his form, was the only one of their number who could manage to squeeze himself through the narrow opening. The stone above the circular hole in the roof, or ceiling, could not be moved from the inside. The hiding-place that they had deemed so secure a refuge was nothing but a death-trap.

Peter Klein turned in anger upon the guide.

"So much for your wisdom," he cried, "so much for your oath!"

The man's eyes flashed. His hand went to the knife he carried in his belt. One half of him was a savage, and the other half a Spaniard.

"Do you think," said he, "that I thought my brother would be killed?"

"So far as I can see," said Klein, "it is all the same to you."

"There you prove yourself a fool," answered the other hotly. "You think I do not love him because I do not weep like a woman and gnash my teeth. Understand this--the heart of a Spaniard is like a deep pool, the surface of which is still. We feel; we love. Also, I warn you again, we can hate."

The spy dared not face the man's blazing eyes.

"I warn you," Fernando went on, his voice rising as passion swayed him, "if you hold me up to ridicule, you die. I am ready enough to admit that my judgment

was at fault--that I forgot that, without my brother, we were unable to leave the cave--but to be put to scorn by such as you is more than I will endure!"

Peter Klein fell back before the fiery onslaught of the man's words as though he had been struck. The half-caste stood upright, every muscle taut, his eyes ablaze, his clenched teeth showing in the blackness of his long moustache. Then he hurled his knife upon the floor.

"Why do I waste words upon such as you?" he cried, as if in anguish. "You are not worthy of my anger!"

"I cannot yet understand," said Harry. "If the sheikh is so formidable an adversary, why did you send your brother into the night dressed in Klein's clothes?"

"I spoke high words of the prowess of the Black Dog," said Fernando, "but all the time I believed in my brother. Cortes was a fine shot, second only to the sheikh himself. Moreover, he was agile, one of the finest stalkers who ever lived. I knew, when I was sitting by the fire, that we would soon hear a shot. You thought that I was sleeping, but I was praying to the Holy Virgin that the first shot would be fired by my brother, and that the Black Dog would lie in his own blood, his life ended, the Book of Fate closed upon his evil deeds. When I heard the double report, my heart sank within me. I knew that my brother had been outwitted--that the victory lay with the sheikh."

"And in the meantime," said Harry, "we are buried alive!"

"The fault is mine," said the guide. "I should have asked my brother to remove the stone at the entrance before he went, in case of any mishap. I forgot to do so. I ask forgiveness."

"There is nothing to forgive," said the boy. "In such a country as this, encompassed upon every hand by death and dangers of all kinds, there are a thousand things to think of. I would be the last to blame you."

"You are generous," said the man. "The English, with all their faults, are the most generous race on earth; and because they are just, I honour them. We have food and water to last for some days. We can but put our trust in Providence."

Of the days that followed it is unnecessary to tell in detail. In the gallery, shut out from the outside world, from the pure air of the mountains and the sunlight, existence was a living death. For all that, it was wonderful for how long they retained their strength. Indeed, it is a remarkable fact that a man can go for many days with little food, if he has water to drink and is not asked to undergo great physical exertion. But at last Peter Klein grew so weak, and the beating of his heart so slow, that Harry feared he was dying.

It was during these days that the boys came to love the wizened half-caste in whose hands was their fate. Fernando's courage knew no bounds; it was as if his will-power was invincible. Never once did a word of despair or hopelessness leave his lips.

They longed for the open air, for freedom. Days and nights were all the same to them, except that sometimes the sunshine, sometimes the moonshine, invaded the depths of their prison through the great fissures in the wall. As time went on it was difficult not to give up hope.

At last, one night, Fernando rose to his feet and approached Harry, who found it impossible to sleep.

"My friend," said he, "the sands are running down, but I think that I can save you."

"How?" asked the other.

"Look at me!" cried the man. "I am little better than a skeleton. I think I can creep through the opening in the wall."

Assisted by Braid, he crawled to the fissure, and there endeavoured to pass through. It is true that he had wasted away terribly, but the opening was very narrow, and his frame was larger than his brother's.

For an hour he struggled vainly. At last, he gave it up.

"It is no good," said he. "I cannot do it. We are lost. Nothing remains but death."

They resigned themselves to their fate. They were far past all complaint. Even Klein was silent; he no longer moaned and deplored his unhappy lot. Even he had learnt to prepare himself for death.

Three more days passed, and at the end of that time Fernando himself lay upon the floor in a kind of faint.

It was bitterly cold. They had no fire. They had burned all their wood. Only a little water remained. The prospect before them was horrible to contemplate. They were destined to be driven mad by thirst.

For some time Harry walked backward and forward. Then fatigue overcame him, and, lying down upon the floor, he immediately fell asleep. When he awoke it was daylight. He went to the bucket of water to divide the little that remained into four equal parts. To his astonishment, he found that the bucket was empty.

He uttered a loud exclamation, which brought Braid to his elbow.

"What has happened?" asked Jim.

"Our last drop of water," said Harry, "has been stolen."

There was little doubt as to who was the thief. Neither Harry nor Jim nor Fernando could have been capable of such treachery. Harry turned fiercely upon Peter Klein.

"Do you deny this?" he asked.

"Yes," said Klein; "I do."

They examined his pannikin and found that the inside was wet. There was also a drop of water upon the floor by the place where he had been sitting. Without a doubt, during the earlier part of the night, the man had pretended to be

asleep until the three others were buried in slumber. Then he had stolen all that remained of their water.

Fernando rose slowly to his feet, drew his long knife, and, tottering from weakness, approached the German spy.

"Death," said he, "is too good for you! But, weak as I am, you die!"

Harry held out his hand.

"Let him be," said he. "His cowardice will avail him little. He will only live to see us go before him. He has done no more than prolong the agony of his death!"

The guide returned, growling like a dog, and sat down upon the floor.

During that day hardly a word was spoken. They sat in silence, waiting for the end. Towards afternoon a raging thirst began to consume them; their blood grew hot in a kind of fever; their tongues clave to the roofs of their mouths.

And at nightfall they lay down to die. Fernando was now in a kind of stupor. For an hour he never moved, but lay like one already dead. Both Braid and Klein fell asleep, but Harry found sleep impossible.

Knowing that the end was drawing near, he resolved to commend his soul to the Almighty, and, burying his face in his hands, he began to pray.

For some minutes he prayed silently, making his peace with God. When his prayer was finished he felt happier. He sat for some time with his hands clasped about his knees, looking upward at the round stone which confined them in their prison.

And as he looked the stone moved as if by magic, silently. Through the round hole above, the light of the moon streamed down into the darkened vault.

CHAPTER XVI--The Enemy in Sight

For some moments Harry Urquhart did not move. He sat like a graven image, his eyes staring, his jaw dropped in amazement. Then the full truth burst upon him in a flood. He sprang to his feet, uttering a loud cry which immediately awoke both Braid and Peter Klein.

"What is it?" cried Braid. "What has happened?"

Harry seized his comrade by the shoulders and shook him violently.

"Tell me, Jim, have I gone mad, or has a miracle happened? Look there!"

Braid looked in the direction indicated, and saw, to his amazement, that their prison doors were opened, that the stone had been rolled away from the circular hole in the roof.

By that time Fernando had got to his feet. He came swaying towards them, and clutched hold of Jim's arm for support. Perhaps the climate of the Coast had weakened his constitution. At any rate, he was now far weaker than the others--even than Klein.

"We are saved!" he cried. "But beware of treachery. For all we know the Black Dog may be hiding at the entrance."

Harry cared nothing for that. A sense of freedom, a breath of mountain air, were worth all the risk in the world. He scrambled up, caught hold of the edge of the hole, and with great difficulty managed to pull himself through, so that he stood in the light of the stars, amid the mists that wrapped the mountain.

At his feet lay a still, dark form. It was that of a human being, but so motionless that the boy feared that it was that of a dead man. Going down upon his knees, he turned the body over, so that the face was uplifted to the moon; and at once he recognized the features of Cortes, the younger guide, who had gone out to slay the sheikh.

He spoke to the man, but received no answer. Then he rushed to a spring that was near by and quenched his burning thirst.

There he was joined by Jim Braid and Peter Klein. Both went down upon their knees at the spring-side to drink their fill.

After that they assisted the elder guide to escape from the terrible prison in which they had spent so many days. They sprinkled water upon the lips of the younger man, and at last he opened his eyes.

"We thought you dead," said Harry. "Tell us what happened to you?"

"I went my way, dressed in the clothes of that cur, to trick the Black Dog of the Cameroons. Knowing the man with whom I had to deal, I was cautious and on my guard.

"I approached so silently that not even a lizard could have taken alarm. Then I saw the man waiting for me on the mountain-side. He was dressed in his white Arab robes; he was seated on a boulder, with his rifle on his knees.

"I considered what was best to do. I had intended to show up at a distance, pretending that I was the German. Then I remembered that if the sheikh fired I would assuredly be hit. In the end I decided to creep upon him unawares, to snatch his rifle from his hands. With a man like the Black Dog it is best to strike the first blow, and also to strike hard.

"How he saw me I cannot say. His eyes are like those of a lynx. But he discovered me and fired, and I was wounded. The bullet pierced my chest. For a moment I think I was unconscious, for when I opened my eyes the sheikh himself was kneeling over me, looking into my face. He recognized me, and called me by my name.

"Without doubt he thought I was dying. Indeed, he left me to die. He went his way up the mountain. Presently I heard a shot, and a little after the Black Dog came past me, running as if for life. When he was quite close to me I saw that there was blood upon his robes and that he was running after the manner of one who suffers pain and is wounded. How that happened I do not know. At the time I thought little about it. I did not doubt that I myself stood at the door of death.

"I fainted, and when I recovered consciousness I was consumed by a terrible thirst. Fever raged in my bones. With great difficulty I managed to drag myself to the side of a spring, where I drank great draughts of water. After that I fell asleep; and for the next three days I lay in that place, thinking that I was dying, frequently drinking at the stream. I could not walk, for whenever I tried to rise to my feet there was a pain in my chest like a red-hot sword, and I came near to fainting.

"One night I thought of my brother and my friends, and then it was that I remembered that you were unable to escape from your prison.

"Ever since then I have been struggling up the side of the mountain, endeavouring to get to you to rescue you. Every minute I thought that I was dying; sometimes I was so weak that I felt I could go no farther. Yet every day I made a little progress. I followed the direction of the stream. I drank the water, and ate wild berries, as well as the provisions I carried with me.

"I reached the stone; I remember rolling it away, and after that I remember no more."

The narration of this story was too much for the man's strength. As he said the last words he fell backward in a faint.

For the rest of the night they camped in the open air, sleeping around a fire. They remained upon the mountain-top for four days. The German troops had evidently left the district, and though Harry and Jim hunted in the valley, and succeeded in shooting some guinea-fowl, they saw no signs of von Hardenberg and the sheikh, who had evidently pushed forward on their way towards Maziriland and the Caves of Zoroaster.

It is remarkable how quickly they were completely restored to health. Food and water and the freshness of the mountain air lent their assistance to Nature; and even Cortes, who had been so severely wounded, rapidly regained his strength. Indeed the wound was already healed, and all he required was nourishment and rest.

When they were able to continue their journey, they decided to advance with the greatest caution. A few miles farther on they would come to a long valley, two hundred miles in length, which led directly towards the frontier of Maziriland. Cortes knew of a path that ran along the crest-line of the mountains, whence they would be able to survey the surrounding country except such as was hidden by the density of the bush. If they followed this there would be small chance of their being taken by surprise, either by the Germans or von Hardenberg and the sheikh.

At first they marched by easy stages, in order not to overtax their strength. This part of the mountain was inhabited by a great number of rock-rabbits, many of which they were able to kill with sticks; and these rabbits soon found their way into the cooking-pot.

By degrees they made their daily marches longer. They were anxious to overtake Captain von Hardenberg and the Black Dog, who were evidently several miles in advance. Finally they marched by night, the guides taking a direct route by the stars.

Suddenly, one midnight, as they rounded a great spur of rock, they saw a small light, dim and twinkling in the distance like a star, far below them in the valley.

"Look there!" cried Harry, pointing ahead.

"Is it a camp-fire?" asked Braid, turning to the two guides, who stood together.

Both bowed their heads.

"It is a camp-fire," said Fernando. "It is the camp-fire of the Black Dog of the Cameroons."

CHAPTER XVII--A Shot by Night

Towards morning the fire dwindled and went out. At daylight they could see no sign of von Hardenberg and his companion. The entire valley appeared deserted.

In this part of the country there were no villages, the valleys being too barren and infertile for agriculture.

The next night the bivouac-fire was again visible, this time nearer than before. On the third night they were not more than seven or eight miles in rear of those whom they pursued.

On these occasions they were careful that their own fire should not be observed. They always lit it under the cover of large rocks or boulders, screening it from the north. They had every reason to suppose that the sheikh and his companion believed them dead. The Black Dog had doubtless told his employer that their pursuers had been buried alive in the crater of the old volcano.

Every night they were careful to post a sentry, and, on one occasion, when the first signs of dawn were visible in the east, Harry--who was on watch--suddenly heard a sound, faint but very distinct, immediately behind his back.

He turned quickly, but could see nothing. He waited for some moments, holding his breath, with his finger ready on the trigger of his revolver.

Nothing happened. The boy imagined that the sound had been caused by a rock-rabbit or a mountain-rat, and was about to resume his former position, when something descended upon him with a spring like that of a tiger.

In the nick of time he jumped aside. He saw a white figure rushing violently through space. In the moonlight he saw the flash of a knife that missed him by the fraction of an inch, and the next moment he was full length upon the ground, struggling in the arms of a powerful and savage man.

[image]

IN THE MOONLIGHT HE SAW THE FLASH OF A KNIFE THAT MISSED HIM BY THE FRACTION OF AN INCH

Locked together in a death-grip, they rolled over and over, first one on top and then the other. There was a loud shout, which came from the lips of Braid, and at that the two guides sprang to their feet and hastened to Harry's assistance.

The struggle ended as suddenly as it had begun. One second, strong fingers gripped Harry by the throat, and the next his adversary was gone. He had vanished like a ghost; he had slipped away like an eel.

Harry Urquhart sprang to his feet and listened. He heard a laugh--a wild, fiendish laugh--far away in the night. Stooping, he picked up a bare knife that was lying on the ground.

"I wrenched this from his hand," said he, showing the knife to Fernando.

The half-caste examined it in the firelight. It was a knife of Arab design.

"That," said he, "is the knife of the Black Dog."

"Why did he not fire?" asked Harry.

"Evidently because he did not wish to warn the Germans. That is a bad sign; it means that the German troops are in the neighbourhood."

The following night, when they scanned the valley, they could see no sign of the camp-fire of von Hardenberg and the Arab. The sheikh, having failed in his enterprise on the previous evening, was evidently determined to exercise greater caution. Harry examined the valley with his glasses, not only to the north but also to the west and to the east. However, he could see no sign of their enemies.

"I do not like the look of it," said Fernando. "So long as we knew where the Black Dog was, we had the whip hand of him. We must be prepared for the worst."

"Surely," said Harry, "he will push on towards Maziriland?"

"The shortest way is not always the quickest," answered the other. "As likely as not he has gone back upon his tracks, and even now is encamped somewhere behind us."

That night they deemed it advisable to light no fire. Seated amid the rocks on the crest-line of the hills, where the wind moaned and howled from the west, they held a council of war. It was decided that, during the march on the following day, the two guides should act as scouts, the elder moving some distance in advance of the three Europeans, Cortes following in rear.

By the time the sun rose above the mountain-tops, they were well upon their way. At mid-day they halted for a meal, and it was then that Cortes came running to the bivouac.

"Come here!" he cried. "I have seen them."

They followed the man to the crest-line, crawling on hands and knees. Only Peter Klein remained by the fire. Since they had escaped from the crater of the volcano no one had spoken to the man. The guides showed only too plainly that they despised him, and neither Harry nor Braid were disposed to forgive the scoundrel for having stolen their last drop of water.

They came to a place where the valley-side dropped down in an almost perpendicular cliff. Far below was a little grove of trees, around which a stream meandered, its waters glistening in the sunshine. Beyond the grove, on the other side of the valley, following a kind of bridle-path that led to the north, were five men, one of whom was dressed in robes of flowing white.

"That is the sheikh," said Fernando. "He walks by the side of the German."

"And the other three?" asked Braid.

"They are natives from the bush. The sheikh has doubtless enlisted their services during the last three days. The natives dare not refuse him labour. He was all-powerful when he was a slave-trader; fear of him passed from village to village by word of mouth. On an expedition such as this, he is doubly to be

dreaded, because he has friends among the Maziris themselves."

"Then," cried Harry, "supposing he tells the tribe to rise against us?"

"There is little fear of that," said Fernando. "He is hated by the chiefs and head-men, who resent the authority he wields over many of the people."

"Then, what will he do when he draws near to the caves?"

"He will rob by night," said Cortes. "Under cover of darkness he will endeavour to secure the treasure."

"My brother," said the elder man, laying a hand upon the other's shoulder, "tell me, how far away is Black Dog?"

The man judged the distance with his eye.

"Sixteen hundred yards," said he.

"Nearly a mile," said the other. "I will try my luck. I have sworn an oath by the saints."

So saying, he lay down upon his face and loaded his rifle. Lifting the back-sight, he took long and careful aim, and then pressed the trigger. There came a sharp report, and the bullet sped across the valley.

In the space of a few seconds the sheikh and his followers had vanished. To hit a moving figure at that distance was a well-nigh impossible task, but that the bullet had not been far from its mark was apparent from the way in which the party had so suddenly disappeared.

Von Hardenberg was moving up one side of the valley, Harry and his companions on the other. It was therefore a race for the treasure. If Harry reached the caves first, he would be unable to enter the vault, by reason of the fact that the Sunstone was not in his possession. He would have to lie in wait for the Black Dog and the German.

For two days they saw nothing more of their rivals. There was water in plenty in the district, and presently springs and streams became even more numerous, and they entered into a country that was thickly wooded. At the same time the mountains became more wild and rugged, and it was soon impossible to make progress by way of the hills.

They therefore descended into the valley, and entered a region of scattered trees, which gradually became a forest, where they were shut out from the sunlight and the light of the stars. There were no paths in the forest, and they could seldom march more than eight miles a day by reason of the tangled undergrowth through which they had to cut a passage.

When they came out of the forest they were in a land of rolling hills, which, the guides told them, mounted to the summit of Maziriland. Their first camp in this district was under the lee of a hill; and, since they had seen nothing of either von Hardenberg or the German troops for several days, they deemed it safe to light a fire. There was no scarcity of fuel, and very soon a fire was blazing,

the green wood crackling and hissing in the flames. Over the fire a kettle was suspended by a chain from three iron rods, and from the spout of this kettle steam was issuing, when suddenly a shot was fired in the distance, and a bullet drilled a hole through the kettle, so that the water from within ran down into the fire, whence issued a little cloud of steam.

CHAPTER XVIII--A Dash for Liberty

As one man they rushed to their arms, and even as they did so a score of shots rang out, and the whistling bullets cut the earth about their feet.

"The German troops!" cried Cortes. "We must gain the hill-top or we're lost!"

Firing into the darkness as they ran, they ascended the hill with all dispatch. At the top they found themselves subjected to a withering fire, which poured down upon them from all directions. The night was alive with the sharp reports of rifles. Sudden flashes of fire showed up on every hand, like so many living tongues of flame. It was evident the enemy was in force.

For four hours the fight continued without a check. The roar of the musketry continued; the hissing of the bullets was like heavy rain. And all this time the German soldiers were working nearer and nearer, until at last they formed a complete circle around the foot of the hill.

They were then close enough for their voices to be audible, and now and again, as a bullet found its mark, a shriek went up in the night.

By then, not one of Harry's party had been struck. This was partly due to the boulders which lay upon the hill-top, and behind which it was possible to obtain cover, and partly to the inferiority of the German marksmanship.

During a lull in the combat, a short respite from the strain of the situation, Harry took counsel with the two guides and Jim.

"It appears to me," he observed, "that if we wait till sunrise we are lost. So far, we have managed to escape death only by reason of the darkness."

"Before the sun rises," said Fernando, "two courses lie open to us: we must either fight our way through the enemy or commend our souls to Heaven."

"I was going to propose," said Harry, "that we gather together in a body and endeavour to charge through the enemy."

"And after that?" asked Braid.

"After that we may either find some place more suitable for defence, or else die in our tracks."

"We can die fighting," said the younger guide.

"Well, then," said Harry, "every minute counts. If we can get through we may be able to cover some miles before dawn is upon us. We must hold together, however. There will be no time to go back to look for one who is lost."

They now prepared themselves to make this last and desperate bid for freedom. They played for the highest stakes, for liberty and life. They could not advance, however, without acquainting Peter Klein of their intention, and when the man was told of what they proposed to do he set to shaking in his limbs.

Harry was in no mood to humour him. He had long since lost all patience with their uninvited guest.

"You have two minutes," said he, "in which to choose. Either you come with us, or stay here, or else you can go over to the enemy. It does not matter very much to us which you decide to do."

The man picked up his rifle. He tried to speak, and stuttered. He was incoherent from fear, though it was his own countrymen who opposed them. German and German-trained native troops were in the valley in about equal numbers.

"What am I to do?" he asked.

"Remain at my side," said Harry. "Do not fire until I tell you to. We are going to creep as near to the enemy as we can, and then charge through together."

Klein said nothing, but they heard the bolt of his rifle shake in his hand.

Then all five began to crawl down the hill, picking their way carefully over the stones, advancing as stealthily as possible.

The enemy's fire had somewhat abated. Perhaps they also--true to the traditions of the Prussian army--contemplated an assault. Instead of the continuous rattle of musketry that had lasted for so long, only an occasional shot resounded in the valley.

Inch by inch, they drew nearer to the enemy's position, and when not twenty yards from the place where a German officer was shouting hoarse, guttural words of command, Harry whispered to his followers to halt. He desired to give them time to gain their breath, that the charge might be as swift as it was sudden and unexpected.

During the next few minutes it was as if each second dragged out into eternity. At all events, the anxiety and excitement had the most amazing effect upon Peter Klein, who was a coward from the day of his birth. It drove him mad, and he became like some infuriated beast, a bull in a bull-ring or a baited bear.

Suddenly springing to his feet, before Harry had given the word of command, he discharged the magazine of his rifle in the direction of his own countrymen. Then, seizing the weapon by the muzzle, he dashed down hill, swinging it round and round his head as a man uses a club.

Harry and his three companions followed in the man's wake, firing right and left. Though it was dark, they were near enough to Klein to see what happened. The man was as terrible in his madness as he had been despicable in fear. Without a doubt, terror had overcome his senses. Giving himself up for lost, he had been able to bear the suspense no longer, and now rushed furiously, demented and panic-stricken, into what looked like certain death.

A German sergeant jumped out of the grass before him, and the butt of Klein's rifle crushed the man's skull as though it were a nut. Another man--a native--a second later was dropped to the ground, with a blow that would have felled an ox. A third rushed upon the maniac, and so tremendous was the stroke that sent him to his death that Klein's rifle broke at the small of the butt.

Still the ex-spy was undefeated. With the steel barrel in one hand and his revolver in the other, he went onward in the dark, filling the night with an infinity of savage and appalling yells.

CHAPTER XIX--War to the Knife

Ten minutes later Peter Klein stopped dead, looking about him with wild, staring eyes. The night was cold--for they were still at a great altitude--and the breath was pumping from his nostrils as it does with a horse. However, he was given little time to rest, for Harry, running forward, seized him by the arm.

"Get on!" cried the boy. "We're not out of danger yet."

On they went, racing for freedom, crossing hills and minor valleys, passing beneath trees, and sometimes knee-deep in the water of forest streams.

For a time they heard the guttural voices of the Germans behind them. At last these became inaudible in the distance. The soldiers were not able to follow

on their tracks, since they had no way of knowing which route the fugitives had taken.

At last Harry deemed it safe to call a halt.

Klein, who was still running like one possessed, had to be stopped by force. He would not desist from flight, until Jim Braid had tripped him up. Harry, followed by Fernando, came upon them shortly afterwards.

"See," cried Harry, pointing to the east, "there comes the dawn! In half an hour it will be daylight."

"Do you know where we are?" asked Braid, turning to the guide.

"Yes," said the man. "We are towards the Maziri frontier. I recognize the mountains on the sky-line. There is a good place near at hand where we can hide, and where--even if we are discovered--we will be able to hold our own for many days."

"Let us go there," said Harry. "But where is your brother?"

No one answered. They peered into the faces of one another. The younger guide was missing.

Fernando, the man who had sworn an oath to kill the Black Dog, lifted his hands to his mouth and let out a long-drawn howl which was like that of a jackal, and which carried far in the stillness of the morning. It was a signal that his brother knew of old. Three times he repeated it, and each time lifted a hand to his ear, and stood listening expectant.

No answering cry came back. A death-like silence reigned over the valleys and forests and the mountain-side.

"He is lost?" asked Harry.

"He may have taken the wrong direction in the darkness. He may have been struck by a bullet. Who can tell? These things are in the hands of God."

"He may be somewhere near at hand," said Braid, hoping for the best.

Fernando shook his head.

"If Cortes is alive he is far away; otherwise he would have heard my signal. At any rate we can do no good by waiting here. We must push on; the day approaches. As I said, I know of a place where we shall be safe."

As the grey light extended from the mountain-tops to the valleys, Fernando led them to a kind of ancient fort, constructed of great stone boulders and surrounded by a deep ditch. In the parapet of this fort there were loopholes through which to fire, and in the centre, well screened from observation, was a small hut made of the branches of trees. The redoubt stood on a sharp pinnacle of rock commanding a wide stretch of country on every hand. It had doubtless been constructed centuries before, when there was a more advanced stage of civilization in the heart of Africa. Indeed, it is from this bygone civilization that the Maziris themselves trace their origin.

As the daylight increased they were able to take in their surroundings. Many miles up the valley, it was just possible to see a little village, which, Fernando assured them, was in Maziriland itself. Some distance to the west was a great forest which extended as far as the eye could reach.

Harry looked around him in amazement.

"But this place is almost impregnable," he cried. "Four resolute men could hold it against hundreds."

"Is there water here?" asked Braid, turning to the guide.

The man pointed to a small spring which bubbled up to the surface near the door of the hut.

"I will tell you the story of this place," said he. "Years ago a party of six Maziris sought refuge in this fort, which was built in the olden times, when the Ancients crossed the deserts from the east. For eight months those six men held the army of one of the Cameroon kings at bay. They had laid in a great store of food. They made the defence even stronger. Time and again they beat back the attack."

"And in the end?" asked Jim.

"In the end four of their number were killed, but the other two escaped."

"Escaped! How did they escape?"

"You will not believe me, but it is true. They escaped underground--like moles."

"Underground!" cried the two boys, echoing the man's words in their astonishment.

"Yes," said the guide. "All those months they had been digging a tunnel. The hill is composed of a very soft kind of rock; and they had brought spades and picks from Maziriland. Day and night they worked, until at last the tunnel became a mile in length, extending from the inside of the fort into the very heart of the forest."

"Where is the entrance?" asked Harry.

"It is here."

The man led the way to the hut. The floor was covered with rushes, and these he gathered together in his arms and piled in a great heap before the doorway. Underneath was a circular piece of wood, like that which is often found on the top of a well. Lifting this, Fernando pointed to a flight of steps that led down into impenetrable darkness.

"They went this way?" asked Harry.

"Two escaped by way of the tunnel, whilst a third, who was already dying, covered up the entrance with rushes. When their foes got in they found only four men--dead. And they believed that they had been held at bay during all those months by four men instead of six."

"Does your brother know of this place?"

"Yes; and if he is alive he will guess where we have gone. He will come to us by way of the tunnel. If he is dead----" And Fernando shrugged his shoulders.

During that day and the next they saw nothing of the Germans; but Fernando protested that it would not be safe to push on towards Maziriland, since the enemy was certainly in the district. Also they still hoped that Cortes would return.

During these days they were not idle. Jim Braid was left behind in charge of Peter Klein, who could not be trusted to hold his own in case of sudden attack, whilst Harry and Fernando departed into the forest by way of the tunnel.

The long journey through the subterranean passage was one of the most unpleasant experiences that Harry Urquhart ever had in his life. Not only was the place pitch dark, but water had filtered through the walls and lay here and there in pools upon the floor. These pools had grown stagnant, and the air was humid, tainted with the foulest smells.

At last, they came forth into the forest. There, for two days and one night, they collected a great store of provisions. They dared not fire their rifles, but there was no necessity to shoot. The forest abounded in ground-nuts and various kinds of fruit. Also, Fernando knew where the natives set their traps, and the two devoted their time to robbing these, until finally they had sufficient supplies to last for several days--rabbits, small hog-deer, and many kinds of birds.

They were obliged to make three journeys to the fort with all the provisions they had obtained, since it was not possible to carry a heavy load through the narrow, stifling tunnel.

On the third day they set to work cutting up the meat and drying it in the sun. Sun-dried meat is uncommonly tough, but it has this advantage--it will keep for many months.

That evening they heard a shot far away in the distance. It was followed by another, and yet a third, and towards midnight the whole valley was alive with musketry.

"What is it?" asked Harry of the guide.

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"I cannot say," said he. "Either my brother is pursued by the Germans, or a fight is taking place between them and the Black Dog--in which case I may be robbed of my revenge."

They divided the night into three watches. Peter Klein, they knew, they could not trust in any responsible position requiring strong nerves and presence of mind. They set the man to the most menial tasks--chopping wood, cooking, and repairing the ancient defences.

All night the firing in the valley continued; by daybreak it was near at hand.

They could see the figures of the Germans racing across the valley, advancing in extended order or else in small groups which at that distance resembled families of mice.

That afternoon a small reconnoitring-party of the enemy ascended the hill upon which stood the fort. The defenders lay in hiding behind the parapet, determined not to show themselves, not to disclose their hiding-place, unless it was certain that the Germans intended to occupy the hill-top.

They waited till the eleventh hour. The enemy was not twenty paces from the ditch when Fernando rose to his feet, and cried out in the German language, ordering them to halt on peril of their lives.

At the same time, he raised his rifle to his shoulder and sent a bullet over their heads. As one man they turned and fled, racing towards the forest, and were lost to sight.

It was from that moment that the siege commenced. Their place of refuge became a citadel encompassed on every hand by a hostile force. The Germans gathered round them in companies, and day and night strove to induce the garrison to surrender. It was trench warfare in the heart of the African wild.

CHAPTER XX--Honour among Thieves

The Germans soon found that it was impracticable to attempt to capture the fort by a direct frontal attack in daylight. The slope of the hill was so steep that it was possible to ascend only by way of a path which was covered by the rifles of the defenders. Apparently they had no artillery at their disposal.

At first they charged up this path after the manner in which they were wont to hurl themselves upon the lines of trenches in Poland and in Flanders. They were swept down like chaff. Owing to the narrowness of the way they were obliged to advance upon the fort in single file, and as each man appeared before the loopholes he paid the price of his daring.

After the first assault they resorted to tactics more likely to succeed. They attacked twice by night. But, fortunately for the defence, the nights were fine and

starry, a full moon was up, and it was possible to see the enemy long before he reached the walls of the fort.

For all that, the greatest vigilance was necessary both by day and night, to avoid being taken by surprise. One or other of the defenders was always on guard. Even Peter Klein was of some use. Though he could not be relied upon to act with courage or promptitude, his eyesight was good enough, and he took his turn at sentry by day. Moreover, he was in such abject terror of falling into the hands of his own people that Harry suspected that the German authorities at Dualla had learnt something of the Sunstone and von Hardenberg's private mission to the Cameroons.

By night, when the fort might be rushed, they thought it best not to leave their destiny in the hands of one who had failed them so constantly. The only occasion on which Klein had covered himself with credit was at a moment when fear had so possessed him that he lost all sense of danger and became for the time being a raving madman.

It would be wearisome to describe the details of the siege as it continued day by day. There is no question that the defenders would have held their own for many weeks had it not been that gradually a calamity was drawing down upon them. They were running short of ammunition. Their bandoliers were nearly empty.

The Germans kept up a constant fire upon the fort, and the garrison, in self-defence, was obliged to answer back. They calculated that, with the greatest economy, they had cartridges sufficient to last them only four days more. It was then that Klein, Harry, and the guide entered the hut and held consultation together. Jim Braid was on sentry, stationed on the parapet. The sun was setting in the west.

It was Fernando who was the first to speak.

"The situation is very plain," said he. "We can hold out until our ammunition is exhausted, and then retire by way of the tunnel, still hoping to reach the caves in advance of von Hardenberg, or we may retire to-night.

"Which do you advise?" asked Harry.

"I suggest," said the guide, "that we go at once. We shall need ammunition on our return journey to the coast. We have many miles to traverse. Every moment we delay means a further expenditure of ammunition. We have not a cartridge to spare."

"Then," said Harry, "it is settled: we leave the fort this evening."

It was then that there came a loud and sudden burst of firing from down the valley, from the direction of the forest. All three sprang to their feet.

Braid, from the parapet, called loudly, and they hastened to his side.

"Look there!" he cried.

Turning their eyes in the direction indicated, they beheld a man running as if for life towards the forest. In pursuit, some distance in his rear, came a large party of Germans, shouting so loudly that their voices were audible even at that great distance, and firing their rifles as they ran.

"Who is it?" cried Harry.

"I cannot say," said the guide. "He is too far away."

The firing continued until long after nightfall. It rolled through the forest like a wave. It was not until ten o'clock that the night was still.

The four defenders gathered at the door of the hut.

"You think it wiser to go?" said Harry

Fernando bowed his head.

"Come, then! Let each man load himself with such provisions as he can carry. We should start at once. It is necessary for us to be far away before morning."

Harry Urquhart turned and was about to enter the hut, when he was brought to an abrupt standstill. He stood motionless and gaping, unable at first to believe the evidence of his own eyes. For there, in the doorway, within the enclosure of the fort, stood the figure of a man--a man who was dressed in robes of flowing white.

"The Black Dog!" let out the guide, and brought his rifle to his shoulder.

"Peace," said the sheikh, lifting a hand. "Think before you fire."

Fernando's rifle was directed straight at the man's heart. The Arab never flinched. He stood like a statue, speaking in the slow, deliberate tones of one who is in full possession of his senses.

"If you fire," said he, "you slay one who has come to place his services at your disposal. You are surrounded by a legion of foes. Every rifle counts. I bring you aid."

Slowly Fernando lowered his rifle; then he laughed.

"We do not want your aid," said he.

"There," answered Bayram, "you are wrong."

"How so?"

"Here you are imprisoned. You must fight to the end. There can be no question of surrender."

"We do not think of surrender," said the other. "We mean to escape by the way you came. We mean to escape to-night."

The Black Dog shook his head.

"That will not be so easy," he made answer. "The Germans are receiving reinforcements; another column is advancing from the south. The bush swarms with their reconnoitring-parties and patrols. Moreover, guns are approaching up the valley, and may be here at any moment. I speak the truth. Remember, at some

risk I have come here of my own accord."

He spoke slowly, as if choosing his words with care; but his English accent was singularly good.

"You have not yet told us," said Harry Urquhart, "why you have come."

"You are short of ammunition," answered the sheikh.

"How do you know that?"

"For five days I have listened to every shot."

"You have not yet explained," said Harry.

The Black Dog smiled, his white teeth showing in the midst of the blackness of his beard.

"I come with a proposal," said he, "under a flag of truce."

"You have nothing to fear," cut in Fernando. "You speak of a truce. We are men of honour."

"Very well, then," said the sheikh, "my proposal--or rather the proposal of him who sent me--is that your party and mine agree to come to terms. You have run out of ammunition; we can supply you. Boxes of ammunition can be conveyed without difficulty through the tunnel. Moreover, in order to cover your retreat, I swear by Allah that I will lead the Germans on a false scent across the mountains to the east."

"And in exchange for these services?" asked Harry.

The Black Dog paused, looking hard at Fernando.

"In exchange for these services," he repeated, "you are to desist from the pursuit, to allow my employer and myself to pass unmolested in Maziriland."

At this base suggestion, a feeling of such powerful indignation arose in Harry Urquhart that for some moments he could not find his voice. When he spoke at last, his voice trembled with passion.

"You can go back to Captain von Hardenberg," said he, "and you can tell him from me that he has often enough proved himself a rascal, but that I never thought that he would sink to such perfidy as to offer us ammunition to be used against his own countrymen in exchange for his own safety. As for you, it is only because you came here of your own free will that you are allowed to go away in safety. You took us evidently both for cowards and fools. You know now, perhaps, that we are neither one nor the other. But there is a limit to our patience, and I advise you to leave by the way you came as quickly as you can."

The Black Dog drew himself up to his full height, folded his arms, and fixed upon Harry Urquhart his cruel bloodshot eyes.

"These are high words," said he, "to one who has been the master of a thousand slaves. You have asked for war to the knife, and you shall have it. It is apparent from the way in which you speak that you know little or nothing of the man with whom you have to deal. You shall see. I shall prove to you that I am

not one who uses empty words."

At that he turned sharply on his heel, entered the hut, and was gone.

CHAPTER XXI--The Last Cartridge

During the next four days the siege continued, and though their enemies continued to increase in numbers, the Germans were fortunately still without artillery, which would have battered the old fort to dust and ashes in the space of half an hour.

On each occasion when the Germans ventured to assault they were driven back with considerable loss. Indeed, their dead lay so thick upon the path upon the hill-side that those who followed after mounted on the bodies of those who had gone before.

On one occasion a company of native troops actually gained the parapet of the fort. It was a dark night, and they had crept up the hill-side unobserved. With a savage yell, and as one man, they hurled themselves upon the ramparts.

The majority were thrown back in disorder under a brisk fire from the defence, but some half-dozen leapt the ditch and clambered over the wall. Thereupon a brief hand-to-hand encounter ensued. It was an affair of seconds, of fierce cries and groans and savage oaths, and in the end the enclosure of the fort was free of the enemy--except for six motionless forms that lay silent on the ground.

Days passed, and still the defence held out. Indeed, they had actually put off their retreat until too late, for one night they were brought face to face with the unexpected fact that the Germans had discovered the entrance to the tunnel. Fernando, who had passed almost to the mouth of the tunnel, which lay in the midst of the bush, returned to the fort with the news that a large party of German regular soldiers was guarding their only line of retreat. Fernando had little doubt that the Black Dog had found some means by which to betray them.

The Germans apparently hesitated to advance through the tunnel itself, since they were still in ignorance of the strength of the little garrison; and in

any case the narrowness and exceeding darkness of the passage would make an advance an extremely costly affair, whereas ultimate success was by no means assured. They could no longer be blind to the fact that those in the fort were running short of ammunition, and they could afford to play a waiting game.

The situation of Harry Urquhart and his companions was not of the pleasantest; indeed, they could no longer hope. Even Fernando, who had so often proved himself a man of iron, could see no chance of their deliverance.

As a great storm drives up upon the wind, so this tragedy drew to a close. Every round of ammunition--fired in self-defence--every mouthful of food that was eaten, brought it a step nearer the end. They were surrounded on every hand. Great numbers of the enemy had come from the south; both German and native troops were in the district in battalions, with transport and ammunition columns and machine-guns.

By then it was manifest that the Germans could capture the fort whenever they wished, provided they made the necessary sacrifice in lives--a thing which, as a rule, it is not their custom to hesitate to do. They had not yet, however, deployed their whole strength against the garrison--a fact that Harry was not able to explain.

The blow, which they had anticipated for days, fell upon a certain morning, soon after daybreak, when the Germans, their whole force in the valley, advanced in close formation upon the fort.

At the same time a battery of artillery opened fire from the neighbouring hills, and the immediate vicinity of the fort became a pandemonium of dust and smoke and flying stones and masonry, whereas the defenders were well-nigh deafened by the bursting of high-explosive shells.

In spite of this hurricane of lead and steel, time and again shots sounded from the fort; but the great wave came on, overwhelming and irresistible. One behind the other the ranks mounted the path. The defenders kept up a withering fire, until the barrels of their rifles were so hot they could not touch them. And still the enemy advanced.

As the Germans gathered themselves together for a final charge, Harry, Jim Braid, and the half-caste rushed together from the parapet to the only box of ammunition that remained. The box lay open near the door of the hut. Fernando was the first to reach it.

He pulled up sharply, standing motionless and erect. Then he knelt down and took out from the box the only cartridge that was there.

"This is all that is left," said he.

"No more?" cried Harry.

"We have come to the end," said the guide.

Jim Braid turned and addressed his companions.

"Has no one any ammunition?" he asked, and in his voice was a note of dire distress.

Both shook their heads. Peter Klein was cowering in the hut.

"This is all that remains," said Fernando. "It shall be put to excellent use."

So saying he slipped it into the chamber of his rifle and closed the breech with a snap.

Both Jim and Harry turned away their faces. In a few minutes they knew that they must be prisoners in the enemy's camp. Harry allowed his eyes to travel over the parapet of the fort. He saw the German officers reorganizing their scattered ranks in preparation for a final charge.

And then, from a hill-top towards the south, there came a sound that was like the bursting of a thunder-cloud. Something shrieked and hooted in the air, and a great shell from a heavy gun burst in a flash of flame in the midst of the German troops.

CHAPTER XXII--The Conquest of a Colony

Slowly the guide lowered his rifle. All eyes turned to the south, from which direction had come the shell. For a moment, in the valley, in the enclosure of the fort, there reigned a death-like silence--the silence of suspense. The bombardment of the fort ceased as at a stroke.

The calm voice of Fernando broke upon the stillness.

"The British!" said he. "The soldiers from the Coast!"

Hardly were the words from his lips than a great salvo of cannon thundered in the valley, and went echoing far above the tree-tops of the forests, over the ridges of the mountains, towards Maziriland.

And once again, though the little fort was left in peace, the air was alive with shells, which flew upon their way, shrieking and hooting as if in savage glee. Shrapnel burst high overhead, with white puffs of smoke, the bullets falling like hail into the ranks of the astonished Germans. Segment-shells struck the

rocks, breaking into fragments that flew far and wide, inflicting the most terrible of wounds.

The German troops, in good order, shepherded by their officers, retired down the hill, to face this new and far more formidable danger. They assembled on a long spur that jutted into the valley, which they deemed the most suitable position whence to oppose the advance of the British.

"Is this true?" cried Harry. "Is it, indeed, the English?"

"Look!" cried Jim, pointing over the parapet.

A long line of glittering bayonets appeared upon the sky-line, advancing like a running wave upon a low-lying, sandy beach. They came forward without checking, each man keeping his distance from his neighbour, as though they did no more than execute some simple movements on parade. They were in far more extended order than the Germans.

Even as the khaki lines advanced, the Mauser rifles spoke from the hills, and the white dust caused by the bullets flew at their feet. They answered back in volleys, each one of which sounded like the "rip" of tearing paper. The sunshine glittered on the steel of their bayonets, their polished buttons, and the badges on their coats.

Their manoeuvres were like clockwork. When one party advanced, another fired; and thus the long lines of infantry were ever firing, ever advancing upon the enemy's position.

A battle fought under such conditions--which are rare enough in these days when the spade has become an even more important weapon than the rifle--is one of the most magnificent and impressive sights it is possible to see. One catches only glimpses, now and again, of fleeting, crouching figures, running from rock to rock, from cover to cover, appearing and disappearing like gnats in the light of the sun. And all the time a great roar of musketry rises to the heavens--a kind of interminable "crackling" sound, like that of green wood upon a fire, only a thousand times greater in volume and more continuous.

Above this the guns toll ceaselessly, shaking, as it seems, the very ground itself with a series of sullen "thuds", filling the atmosphere with great vibrations, drum-like echoes, and rolling clouds of smoke.

Jim Braid and Harry Urquhart stood side by side upon the parapet of the ancient, crumbling fort. As the gods of Olympus reviewed the struggles of the Greeks and the Trojans, so those two looked down upon the wide amphitheatre where the conflict was taking place, where men were marching shoulder to shoulder into the very jaws of death.

They could see both sides at once. They could see the Germans on the ridge, firing rapidly into the advancing British troops; they could see the British coming on and on, regardless of danger, heeding only the words of command shouted

from line to line.

Far in rear, upon a hill-top, a heliograph blinked and flickered in the sun. There was the officer in command. Thence, by means of his signallers, he controlled the army at his feet, disposing his battalions as a player moves his chess-men on a board.

The two boys stood transfixed in bewilderment and admiration.

"Oh," cried Jim, "what wouldn't I give to be there!"

His heart was with his own countrymen, the thin, khaki lines that were driving straight forward with the tenacity of a pack of hounds that hold the fox in view.

From either side gun after gun spoke in quick succession, until it was as if the world was only thunder and flashes of fire and clouds of yellow smoke. As often as each gun was fired it was loaded and fired again. The noise of the batteries was as persistent as the barking of a chained, infuriated dog.

And then from everywhere, from out of the grass, from behind the rocks, from little undulations in the ground, arose thousands of small khaki figures.

Their ranks were undisturbed; they were even as the staves upon a sheet of music. Line after line extended from one side of the valley to the other, and, in the rear of all, the helio still blinked and glittered, there where the brains of the machine were working the destruction of prophets of "Frightfulness", champions of World Dominion.

A bugle sounded in the air, its thin, piercing notes carrying far. Each of the boys experienced a thrill of pride and exultation, a sensation of sublime excitement, as the British lines answered the bugle with a charge.

Line after line, amid the thunder of the guns, swept up the ridge towards the enemy, the bayonets flashing, the bugle speaking again and again.

And then came a cheer that rent the air--a British cheer--howbeit from the throats of gallant Haussas--that drowned the musketry, that rose superior even to the constant growling of the guns.

Before that mad, headlong onslaught the enemy gave way. The Germans were swamped, as a tide carries away a castle on the sands. As one man, they broke and fled, panic-stricken and defeated.

CHAPTER XXIII--Attacked

As soon as they had collected their belongings and stores, they set about to leave the fort, passing through the tunnel in single file, the guide leading the way and Harry Urquhart bringing up the rear.

By the time they entered the forest the afternoon was well advanced, the sun sinking in the heavens. They hoped to reach the British camp that night, but there was no question that darkness would overtake them long before they could do so.

There was little or nothing to fear. The soldiers had driven the Germans from the district. To all intents and purposes the German Cameroons was conquered, and the remnants of the enemy were returning in hot haste towards the Spanish territory to the east.

When Harry Urquhart and his three companions came forth from the entrance to the tunnel they found a heap of hot, charred wood upon the ground. There was no doubt that recently a fire had been burning, and that the picket that guarded the tunnel had retreated only at the eleventh hour.

During the earlier part of the night they traversed the valley, marching in a bee-line towards the bivouac fires of the British camp. They moved forward in the following order--Fernando went first, some distance behind him came Jim Braid and Peter Klein, and a greater distance in the rear was Harry Urquhart.

Harry had been walking for some time with his eyes fixed upon the ground. He was wondering what the end of all this strange business was to be.

He knew that von Hardenberg had stolen the Sunstone, that he carried it upon his person. It was Harry's ambition, the very lodestone of his life, to recover the Sunstone for his uncle. It was von Hardenberg's object to reach the Caves of Zoroaster, and possess himself of the treasure. This was the man's only aim, for which he had proved that he was prepared to sacrifice his country and his honour.

As he walked, Harry was thinking of these things, when, on a sudden, there came a flash of fire, not ten paces to the right. He pulled up with a jerk, and heard a bullet sing past his head like some evil spirit in the darkness. Then there came

a stinging sensation in the lobe of an ear, and a moment later he felt the warm blood flowing down his neck.

He saw a figure flying in the night, and with a loud cry took up the pursuit. A few seconds later he had flung himself upon a man who struggled in his grasp. On the instant each seized the other by the throat, and in the moonlight Harry recognized that he had come to death-grips with his cousin, Captain von Hardenberg himself.

No sooner was he aware who his opponent was than he saw at once that here was a chance to capture the Sunstone, and for that end he struggled with the desperation that means more than strength.

Placing one leg behind his adversary, and pressing with all his force upon his chest, he endeavoured to throw von Hardenberg backward. And even as he wrestled he felt the Sunstone, sewn in the lining of the Prussian's coat.

Gradually von Hardenberg was forced backward, and then at last he fell, coming heavily to the ground. In his fall he struck his head against a rock, and after that he lay quite motionless and silent.

Harry could hear the footsteps of approaching men. On one hand Jim Braid and Fernando hastened to the boy's assistance; on the other, the Black Dog came forward with rapidity.

As quick as thought Harry pulled out his pocketknife. He had but to rip open von Hardenberg's coat and the Sunstone was his, their journey was at an end.

A sharp cut with the knife, a hand that trembled with excitement thrust through the opening, and Harry's fingers closed upon the precious relic he had come so many miles to gain.

And, at that moment, a violent blow descended upon his head and stretched him senseless on the ground. The Arab sheikh had come to the assistance of his employer in the nick of time. His quick eyes had taken in the situation at a glance. He had seen the Sunstone in the hands of Harry Urquhart, and, lifting his rifle by the barrel, he had brought down the butt upon the boy's head.

For him to snatch up the Sunstone was the work of an instant. And a moment afterwards the Black Dog was flying in the night, carrying in his arms the unconscious body of von Hardenberg.

CHAPTER XXIV--The Caves

Fernando, bringing his rifle to his shoulder, fired a shot at random in the darkness. It was the last round they had. A laugh came back from the distance.

Without a word the guide put down his rifle on the ground and examined the wounded boy.

"He is stunned," said he. "He will recover presently."

So saying he lifted Harry in his arms and carried him a distance of about a hundred yards to a place where there was a small stream in the valley.

There he bathed the boy's face and hands, washing the blood from the wound in his ear. Presently Harry recovered consciousness, sat up, and looked about him.

"Where am I?" he asked.

It took but a word to remind him of what had happened, and then he remembered that he had held the Sunstone in his grasp. He looked up at Jim and smiled.

"I was so near to capturing it," said he.

"We'll get it yet, sir," answered Jim. "Just now I had the shock of my life. I thought you had been killed."

"I'm all right," answered Harry. "I feel dizzy; that's all."

In a little time he was able to continue on his way. The bullet wound in his ear was nothing; it was scarcely painful.

That night they camped in the mountains, intending to march at daybreak towards the British camp. When the sun rose, however, they found to their surprise that the whole column was already on the line of march, moving towards the east in pursuit of the retreating enemy.

When they reached the scene of the bivouac the camp-fires were still burning, but no sign of life remained.

The British column had vanished into the bush; and only a few hospital-wagons were to be seen trundling slowly southward.

In the centre of the deserted bivouac stood a tall solitary tree, and it was under this that they rested throughout the heat of the day. Fernando, who had

been dozing, rose to his feet, stretched and yawned. As he did so he caught sight of a star-shaped cut in the bark of the tree, and on the instant it was as if the man had become transfigured.

His eyes lit up, his lips smiled. Amazement, delight, and infinite pleasure were stamped on every feature of his face.

"What is it?" asked Harry, at a loss to explain the man's behaviour.

"Heaven be praised!" he cried. "My brother is still alive!"

"Alive!"

"Yes. Cortes blazed that tree, and the blaze is not one day old. Last night he was here--in the midst of the British camp."

"Are you sure of it?" asked Braid.

"I know," Fernando answered with conviction. "In the days when we hunted together we sometimes lost one another in the bush, and on such occasions we blazed the trees along the tracks of bush elephants in just such a manner as this."

Harry Urquhart looked about him.

"There is no sign of Cortes here," he said. "He cannot have left with the British?"

"No," said Fernando. "He is hiding somewhere. Let me think, where would he go. Both he and I know this district well."

The man paused a moment, standing perfectly still. Then, on a sudden, with an exclamation, he set off running towards the hills.

He did not return until long after nightfall; and then it was with the joyful news that he had found his brother, sound asleep--beside three boxes of German ammunition.

Without delay, guided by Fernando, the whole party set off in haste. They found Cortes, sleeping heavily, in a little dried-up watercourse well screened by trees. It was characteristic of Fernando that he had not awakened his brother.

Harry bent down and touched the sleeper on the shoulder. The man sat up, rubbed his eyes, and then looked about him. The light of the moon fell full upon his face.

Harry grasped his hand and shook it warmly.

"You escaped?" he cried.

"Yes," said Cortes. "When we charged through the Germans, my foot struck against a boulder and I fell upon my face. I think the fall did some injury to my wound--the wound I had received from the Black Dog; for, when I tried to run, I found myself unable to do so.

"You were then some distance ahead of me," he continued. "I feared I would be overtaken. For a moment I knew not what to do. Then I came to a place where there was a great hole in the ground covered with bushes, and there I hid, allowing the Germans to pass.

"When they had gone, I got to my feet and tried to think matters out. I knew where my brother would take you; I knew he would go to the old fort. I might have rejoined you by way of the tunnel. I thought of doing so, but in the end I decided to go in search of ammunition, of which I thought you might possibly run short. British Government ammunition would be no good, as--with the exception of one Express--we have all got Mauser rifles. So three times I crept by night into the German camp, and each time returned with a box of ammunition. I secured also a haversack of revolver ammunition. Their sentries are sleepy dogs."

"You did splendidly!" cried Harry. "We are absolutely without a round."

"I knew you were in the fort," Cortes went on, "and I guessed you would go to the British camp. It was there that I blazed the tree whilst the troops were marching away. I returned to the hills, because I was tired and wished to sleep. If my brother found the blaze I knew he would follow me here."

The man smiled. He had every reason to be proud.

After a while the younger guide spoke again.

"The Black Dog still lives?" he asked.

Fernando bowed his head.

The following morning they began the final stage of their march towards the frontier of Maziriland. The route led them along the crest-line of the hills, and thence across a valley thick with undergrowth and jungle, where the heat was tropical and humid. They were glad to reach high ground once again, and set forward across the plateau beyond which the Maziri mountains stood up like a line of thrones.

These same mountains had been plainly visible from the old fort they had held so gallantly against the Germans, and had even appeared quite near at hand. But in these high altitudes the atmosphere was exceedingly clear, and, besides, the mountains were of great height, dominating the surrounding country far into the interior of the Cameroons.

It took them in all six more days to reach the frontier, when once again they found themselves in the midst of hidden dangers.

They had no idea of what manner of reception they would receive from the Maziris themselves; indeed, concerning this strange race very little is known, either to anthropologists or explorers.

It is generally supposed that the Maziris are a race that emigrated from north-eastern Africa very early in the known history of the world. Their features are aquiline, their lips thin, and the colour of their skin no more than brown. Not only are they certainly not a Negroid race, but they do not appear to have inter-married with the neighbouring Negro tribes in the Cameroons. It is possible they are direct descendants of the ancient Egyptians, though it must remain a mystery how they brought to the wilds of Western Africa the religion and traditional

customs of the followers of Zoroaster.

As soon as they had crossed the frontier, Cortes and Fernando guided the party towards the west, in which direction were the caves. This also was the most deserted part of the country, nearly all the Maziri villages being towards the east, where the country was more fertile and suitable for pasture.

There is to be found in a certain part of Africa--far from the sites of the famous cities of the Pharaohs--indisputable evidence of an extremely ancient civilization. Even so far south as Mashonaland, are ruins of towns which could only have been originally constructed by highly civilized peoples. Ancient Egyptian history, the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus, as well as the Old Testament itself, place it beyond all doubt that the Egyptians, the Persians and Phoenicians spread their learning and their influence far into the interior of what, until only a few years ago, was the Dark Continent--unexplored, unmapped and quite unknown. It can only be supposed that Maziriland was a relic of the early civilization of the East, in much the same way as the inhabitants of northern Spain are distantly related to the Irish.

Before we enter this strange, mysterious country, it must be placed on record that there befell a certain tragedy. In a word, Peter Klein, having contracted a fever in the jungle, and, being much weakened in constitution by the nerve-strain and the hardships he had undergone, fell into a rapid decline--and died, as he had lived, pleading to be spared.

His companions buried him one evening among the rock-strewn, lonely mountains, and he goes out of this story as he came into it--a poor, mean object, a man of no account.

As for our four adventurers, daylight the next morning found them once more upon the hill-tops, shrouded in the mists. For fear of the Maziris the guides led the party by a roundabout way, giving the valleys, and even the lower mountain slopes, a wide berth; for there they were more likely to fall in with parties of the inhabitants.

On the next day, from the far south, there came a noise like thunder that continued until the afternoon. Hour by hour the British guns spoke in the distance. The Germans were being hounded from the Cameroons.

Day by day, as they continued their journey, the firing was repeated, growing fainter and more distant as they advanced. On the fifth day after Klein's death, they turned towards the north-west, and that evening crossed a valley. Beyond was a grass-covered plateau where wild asses grazed. The plateau dropped suddenly in a sheer wall of cliff, and they were obliged to walk many miles to find a place where they could descend.

At length they reached a mountain-top. Immediately opposite was another mountain, up which there was a path leading to a flight of steps. The steps ended

suddenly in a black, yawning hole in the mountain-side. So far as the inhabitants were concerned the country appeared absolutely deserted. It was a barren inhospitable waste.

"Have we much farther to go?" asked Harry, turning to the elder guide. "Tell me, in which direction are the caves?"

"Yonder," said Fernando, pointing to the black hole in the mountain slope. "Yonder are the Caves of Zoroaster. There lies the treasure which the Black Dog and von Hardenberg have come all these thousands of miles to gain."

In single file, Cortes leading the way, they descended towards the valley.

CHAPTER XXV--The Lock

The Caves of Zoroaster are one of the most remarkable examples of the industry of the Ancients that are known to exist. As we have said, in various parts of the world, especially in the continent of Asia, there are many standing proofs of an advanced stage of civilization many centuries before the Christian era.

There are the catacombs in Upper Egypt--a labyrinth of subterranean passages extending for miles; there are the Pyramids, the Great Wall of China, the hanging gardens of Babylon--all of which are colossal and eternal monuments of the labour, energy and genius of the past.

The Caves of Zoroaster are perhaps as marvellous as any of these. Indeed, it is much to be wondered at that they were not included in the seven wonders of the ancient world. Time has not served to deface their majestic beauty, to detract from the solemn magnificence of these great vaults fashioned by human labour out of the living and everlasting rock.

Soon after our travellers had caught their first glimpse of the entrance to the caves, they decided to camp on the lower slopes of the mountain, for it was already growing dark. It would take them several hours to cross the valley, and they could not hope to accomplish the journey in the darkness. They accordingly retired to a place where there was a great hollow among the rocks, and here they deemed it safe to light a fire and cook their evening meal.

The following morning Harry awoke at daybreak. He was anxious to push on without loss of time. There was no knowing where von Hardenberg and the

sheikh were. Perhaps they had already gained the caves.

As soon as they had breakfasted, Harry and his party continued on their way. The two boys, led by the guides, crossed the valley and then ascended the mountain opposite by way of a bridle-path, worn smooth by the feet of pilgrims. Throughout the ages, devout men had journeyed to the caves from the deserts of northern Africa and Arabia--by way of the caravan routes that extend in all directions across these arid wastes.

The path grew steeper as they approached the entrance to the caves, and presently they found themselves at the foot of a flight of steps. A heavy mist still wrapped the mountain in a kind of shroud. The steps ascended, one above the other, into the very heart of the mist which completely obscured the entrance.

These steps were like "Jacob's Ladder", mounting, as it seemed, to the very zenith of the heavens; and on either side of them, as far as Harry could see, were ranged strange statues--of lions with eagles' wings, of men with the heads of foxes, and great dragons that lay crouching like watch-dogs, guarding the treasure that lay beyond. All were graven in the same rough mountain stone.

For centuries the lightning had played upon the rocks about them, the hail and the rain had lashed these mute, immobile sentinels, so that in many cases they were broken and corroded like the gargoyles on a Norman church.

To mount that flight of nearly a thousand steps in the mists of morning, between these weird and hideous images, was an experience that bordered on the uncanny. On every hand a mighty stillness reigned in the heart of the mountains.

Indeed, it was as if this wild, forgotten country was some colossal graveyard of the past, where the wisdom of the Medes and Persians lay buried to the end of time, where the rugged mountain-tops stood forth like tombstones, piercing the very clouds.

At last they came to the entrance. The steps widened and they stood upon a great stone terrace, level as a table-top, on the farther side of which arose the side of the mountain, formidably smooth and perpendicular, the moisture on its surface glistening in the sunlight that struggled through the mist. It was like a wall of polished steel.

The entrance to the caves was wide enough to allow four men to pass abreast, and about ten feet in height. Black as Erebus it yawned in the savage cliff. On either side, carved in stone, protruding from the rock, were the figures of two enormous giants, armless, with great beards that extended to their waists, and those huge conical helmets on their heads which one has learnt to associate with the Persians, the Assyrians, and the Medes.

Fernando walked to the threshold of the entrance and then turned sharp to Harry.

"I am a Spaniard," said he, "and the Spanish are a superstitious race--at least,

that is how you would express it. Some speak of superstition, others of prescience--or foreknowledge of coming events. Call it what you like, I have the sense of a calamity impending. I am quite sure of that."

"How do you mean?" asked Harry.

"It is like this," Fernando went on; "we have come to a tragedy. The curtain is about to be raised."

"Do you fear to enter the caves?"

"No. But I will not go first. Lead, if you like, I am quite prepared to follow."

This was a new trait in the character of the half-caste. He had never shown fear or hesitation before.

Harry turned to Jim.

"Come," said he, and led the way beneath the darkened archway. Cortes and Fernando followed at their heels.

But Harry Urquhart had not taken ten paces forward when he stood transfixed in wonderment at the solemn magnificence and beauty of the Caves of Zoroaster.

The place was like a great cathedral. It was divided into three aisles by two lines of pillars. These pillars were extraordinarily massive. They had not been built up from the floor to the ceiling, but were part of the living rock, joining the roof to the floor. In other words, the aisles had been hollowed out by human labour, and the rounded pillars left at regular intervals to support the immense weight above.

The cave was lighted from above by several shafts that pierced the mountain, and which threw convergent beams of light across the shadows. Giving upon each of the side aisles were three doors constructed of wood, but barred with iron and studded with scores of nails. Above these doors, around three sides of the cave, was a kind of gallery, connected with the roof by a series of smaller and more frequent pillars.

At the far end, upon an altar, a single oil-lamp was burning. Behind the altar, and about twenty paces distant, was a wall of rock which immediately attracted the attention of the boys.

This rock was rough, as in its natural state, whereas elsewhere in the cave--on the floor, the ceiling, and the pillars--the rock was so smooth that it resembled masonry. Moreover, the aisles were of grey limestone; but the rock behind the altar was of red granite, in which the quartz and mica crystals glittered in the flickering light of the lamp.

By the side of the granite rock was something which Harry Urquhart recognized at once. On a single axis, supported at each end by grooves cut in the pillars, were nine enormous wheels of bronze. On the outside--or what would correspond to the "tyres"--of each of these wheels, were hundreds of strange cuneiform char-

acters.

There was no doubt that beyond the red granite rock lay the vault which contained the treasure, and these wheels composed the Bramah lock by sole means of which the vault itself could be opened.

But without the Sunstone the wheels were useless. On the obverse side of the Sunstone was the explanation, or solution, of the riddle.

Harry walked up to the great bronze wheels and turned them at random, first this way and then that. Each revolved independently of the others, and could be turned either backwards or forwards.

From what his uncle had told him, he knew that each wheel must be turned until the characters visible along a given line corresponded to those upon the Sunstone. There could be no doubt as to where this line was, for, across the wheels, at about the height of a man's eyes, a bar of gold extended.

Whilst Harry and Jim were examining the wheels, Cortes was exploring the side aisles beneath the gallery. Presently he came towards his companions on tiptoe, with a finger raised to his lips.

"Come here!" said he in a whisper, beckoning to Harry.

Harry did so, and was conducted to one of the iron-bound doors, where the guide motioned him to stoop down and listen.

With his ear to the door, Urquhart could hear nothing for some seconds. Then there came to his ears a sound that was unearthly.

It was a low, continuous, moaning sound, like the howl of a dog in the distance. It grew louder gradually until at last it was close at hand, on the other side of the door.

There was something in the vastness of the place, in its stillness and its gloom, that was at once depressing and alarming. Harry Urquhart felt that he was rapidly losing confidence in himself. The great flight of steps without, the stone statues, the two carved giants at the entrance, the shadowy vault of the cave, pierced by shafts of light, and the solitary burning lamp--all these were mystical and weird.

The boy was well able to face danger, to take his life in his hands, but here he was confronted by what was suggestive of the supernatural. A feeling of fear possessed him--he knew not why. He drew back, shuddering, and turned quickly to the guide.

"Someone is coming!" he whispered.

At that moment there came a loud rapping on the other side of the door, which shook and trembled under the blows of someone who seemed like a maniac. They heard a bolt drawn sharply back. And then a voice let out a kind of shriek that ended quite abruptly. As one man, they turned and fled without shame or hesitation.

CHAPTER XXVI--The White Madman

They ran in all haste towards the entrance to the cave. The two guides led the way. If the boys were alarmed, the men were even more so.

The brothers had proved that they did not mind danger in the ordinary acceptance of the term, but, in their thinking, in this place they trespassed upon the precincts of the other world.

Cortes was about to make his escape to the terrace outside the entrance, when Harry called him back.

"Here!" cried the boy. "This way!"

In the semi-darkness he had caught sight of a narrow flight of stone steps which led to the gallery above. He was not so frightened that he had not a natural curiosity to see who approached on the other side of the door.

All this time a noise continued that echoed ceaselessly in the vastness of the cave. It was a noise of bolts withdrawn, chains jangling, locks unfastened, whilst a voice that was hardly human was continuously uplifted in a long, plaintive moan.

In the semi-darkness of the gallery the four trespassers knelt down, hiding behind the pillars in such position that they could see into the central aisle below. Their eyes were fixed upon the door whence issued these strange, uncanny sounds.

Presently the door opened, and there came forth into the light of the lamp the most extraordinary apparition it had ever been the lot of any one of them to see.

It was a madman. Moreover, one who was terrible in his madness. He was of a great age, for the hair of his beard and of his head was white as snow. And yet he was very tall of stature, and had the appearance of a man of colossal strength.

He was clothed in rags--rags which hung together by mere threads, so that his dark skin was visible upon his arms and back. The hair of his head was so long that it reached to his waist, a great beard spread over his chest. At his side he

carried an enormous sword--a two-handed sword such as was used by warriors in ancient days. In one hand he held a staff.

He came forward, singing a wild song that somehow was reminiscent of the desert and the East. He approached the altar where burned the lamp, and there flung himself upon the ground, tearing his hair, gnashing his teeth, and actually foaming at the mouth.

From time to time he lifted his voice in a howl, dismal and prolonged, breaking off in his singing to beat himself upon the chest. It was all terrible to behold. It was like a scene in some majestic Bedlam. This white madman, the semi-darkness of the cave, the flickering light, the enormous pillars--all seemed not of the world we know, but to belong rather to one of the worlds of which we sometimes dream.

Harry, turning to Fernando, whispered in his ear.

"Who is this man?" said he.

"He is Guardian of the Cave. He is said to be a hundred years of age. He has lived here all his life."

The old man rose to his feet and stretched forth his arms. Then, lifting his voice, he uttered an endless string of words that were incomprehensible to both boys. As far as Harry could make out, the man either uttered some fearful curse or else he prayed in anguish.

"What is he saying?" asked the boy.

"I am not sure," answered Fernando; "I know little of the Maziri language. I think he says that the Sunstone has been stolen these many years, but this very day it will return. He says the vault will be opened before nightfall. He says that he himself is about to die."

"How does he pretend to know these things?"

"I cannot say," said the guide. "These men have the wisdom of the ancients, who could read the stars and knew of many things long since forgotten. It is supposed by the Maziris themselves that by means of fasting and penance and self-inflicted torture he has gained such holiness that he can see into the future, that he can read from the Book of Fate."

They could not move their eyes from the Guardian of the Cave. He now stood erect and motionless before the altar like one transfigured into a kind of deity. There was little about him that suggested what we know as human.

He was straight of back, his bare arms folded upon his chest, his head a little lowered. And the shafts of daylight from either side of the cave converged upon the whiteness of his head, so that he was like a saint, solemn and magnificent, surrounded by the all-pervading gloom.

Suddenly he let out a shout that was half a shriek--louder than before; and then they saw that his madness was not feigned. Like a wild beast he hurled himself upon the wheels and set them all in motion, some revolving one way,

some the other. And even as the wheels were turning he shook his fist at the entrance to the vault--the red granite rock at the extremity of the cave.

"Open!" he cried, in the strange Maziri language. "Open in the name of Zoroaster!"

Again and again, he cried to the vault to open, as though that which was inanimate would heed his infuriated words. The spokes of the great bronze wheels reflected the light from the lamp, but there came no answer to the man's cries but the echoes of his own voice in the dimness of the cavern.

Once again he flung himself upon the ground, and prayed in a loud voice that the spirit of Zoroaster might descend and show him how to open the vault. According to Fernando, he asked the gods to grant him one of two favours--either that the secret of the Sunstone might be conveyed to him then and there, or that the Sunstone itself might be returned to the cave.

And suddenly he stopped in the midst of his prayer, springing sharply to his feet. For some seconds he stood quite motionless, in the attitude of one who listens.

Then he spoke slowly and distinctly and less loudly than before.

"My prayer has been heard," said he. "Glory to Zoroaster!"

At that he lifted a hand to an ear and turned his head towards the entrance to the cave.

Those in the gallery listened, too. Sure enough, footsteps were approaching.

A little after, the daylight at the entrance was obscured by a figure--the figure of a tall and slender man dressed in the clothes of a European. For a moment he stood quite motionless, shading his eyes with a hand.

It was apparent that, newly come from the daylight, the new-comer was unable to see in the half-light of the cavern. Neither could he himself be recognized by those in the gallery.

Presently he came forward until he stood before the Guardian of the Cave, and the light from the burning lamp fell full upon his face.

Harry Urquhart caught his breath, and his hand went quickly to the handle of his revolver, when he recognized von Hardenberg, who had come to his journey's end.

CHAPTER XXVII--The Black Dog Bites

For some moments the two men stood facing one another. Neither spoke nor moved.

As they stood thus, a third person entered, swiftly, silently, without being seen either by von Hardenberg or the Guardian of the Cave. Those in the gallery saw who it was: the man was the sheikh, the Black Dog of the Cameroons.

Of the scene that followed the watchers in the gallery were amazed and horrified spectators. It seems that Captain von Hardenberg had not been idle during the time the Sunstone had been in his possession; with Teuton thoroughness and industry he had even learnt to speak in the Maziri tongue.

"Who are you?" said he to the old man, so strange and terrible to behold.

"I do not ask who you may be," answered the other, "because I know."

Word by word, the following conversation was afterwards repeated to Harry by Fernando.

"You know!" cried von Hardenberg. "What do you know?"

"I know that you are he who bears the Sunstone on your person. I order you to deliver it up!"

Von Hardenberg drew back a pace. The Black Dog was crouching like a tiger behind one of the pillars, unseen by either of the speakers.

"Who told you?" cried von Hardenberg. "Who told you I have the Sunstone?"

"These things," said the old man in a great, solemn voice, "these things I know because I am one who holds converse with the gods. Me you cannot deceive. A short time ago I was asleep, and in my sleep I dreamed a dream--that the Sunstone had returned."

"You are mad!" cried the Prussian in brutal derision.

"Aye," said the man, "I am mad; but I am wiser than those who are sane. Deliver up the Sunstone!"

"By what right?"

"By every right. I am the Guardian of the Cave. I have lived five score years, and never once have I ventured beyond the entrance of the Caves of Zoroaster. Come, deliver up the Sunstone."

"And if I refuse?" asked von Hardenberg.

"If you refuse," said the man, "you die!"

Von Hardenberg looked about him with a quick, furtive glance. Softly his hand crept to his belt, where he carried the holster of his revolver.

What happened next was the work of a few seconds. Those in the gallery had no time to interfere. As for the sheikh, he evidently intended that the tragedy should be played out to its end, to the falling of the curtain.

The old man, seeing von Hardenberg's action, lifted his great two-handed sword and flourished it on high. Then, with a spring like that of a tiger, he hurled himself upon the Prussian.

Three shots rang out in quick succession. There were three flashes of fire, like jets of flame, and then three puffs of smoke. The cave was filled with an echo that went on and on as if it would never cease.

And when the smoke cleared, there was the old man lying upon his face upon the floor, silent and still. A century had rolled above his head, for a hundred years he had stood guardian of the Caves of Zoroaster--and now his task was ended.

Harry sprang to his feet, and would have fired then and there at von Hardenberg had not Cortes held him down by force.

"It was murder!" he whispered.

"If you fire, we are lost," cried Cortes. "It is too dark to shoot straight, and the Black Dog will escape us."

Harry resumed his kneeling position and waited.

A horrid silence reigned in the great, domed chamber. The scene was more tragic, more fantastic than ever. The shafts of light from above struck the body of the murdered man; the lamp still flickered before the altar. Even yet, the echoes of the shots were murmuring in the deeper recesses of the place.

Captain von Hardenberg stood stock-still, his revolver in his hand, thin wreaths of smoke issuing from the muzzle. From out of the heart of the stillness there came a chuckle: the Black Dog was pleased to laugh.

Murder was nothing to him. He had dealt for years in human lives. He was implacable, relentless. And even at that same moment he himself contemplated a greater crime, for the commission of which he was hiding in the darkness like a snake, biding his time to strike.

Captain von Hardenberg took two steps towards the body and turned it over with his foot.

"He is dead," said he in German.

The old man, who had been so terrible in life by reason of his madness, now looked sane and beautiful in death. The worn, agonized expression had gone altogether from his features, which were now calm and wholly at peace. With his white hair and ragged clothes, he was like one of the patriarchs of old.

Captain von Hardenberg was not himself. It was plain to see that it was all that he could do to control within him a feeling that was akin to terror. He looked about him with widely opened eyes--at the vast pillars, at the darkened corners of the aisles, at the shafts of sunlight that pierced the darkness like the blades of swords.

With trembling hands he attempted to unbutton his coat. His nerves were so shaken, and he in such feverish haste, that he could not at first succeed. In the end, as if grown desperate, he took a knife from his pocket, opened the largest blade, and cut off the buttons one by one. Then he ripped open his waistcoat, and, a moment after, drew forth the Sunstone and placed it on the altar by the side of the burning lamp.

And next he did a strange thing indeed. He burst suddenly into loud laughter--laughter that was hysterical, delirious.

He had gone through so much; he had faced so many dangers; he had been guilty of a score of crimes; he had lost everything--good name and honour and position--in order to possess himself of the treasure that lay beyond the red granite rock.

And now that all this wealth was as good as his, he could do little else but laugh, in a kind of wild delirium, whilst tear-drops in quick succession coursed down his cheeks.

After a while he mastered himself a little, but not completely. He went to the nine wheels and turned them all ways in a fever of excitement.

Then he remembered what he had to do. He studied the wheels and took notice of the cuneiform writing on the "tyres". At that he returned for the Sunstone and brought it to the Bramah lock.

But, since it was too dark there to see the writing on the stone, he took it back to the altar, and laid it down once more before the lamp. Then he studied the character in the first segment, and, having committed it to memory, he went back to the wheels.

Slowly he turned the first wheel, noting each character as it appeared above the golden bar. At last he appeared satisfied. The cuneiform figure, or character, which lay immediately above the golden bar corresponded to that upon the Sunstone.

Then, in a like manner, he turned the second wheel. Always when he got the wheel in the correct position he compared the two characters--that upon the

Sunstone and that upon the wheel--to make sure they were the same.

Finally, he came to the ninth wheel. His excitement was now so great that those in the gallery could see that he was trembling violently in every limb.

He troubled no longer with the Sunstone. He turned the wheel very slowly, with his eyes fixed upon the red granite rock. Presently there was a "click" like the sound of the turning of an enormous lock. Captain von Hardenberg held the wheel quite still.

There came another "click" even louder than that which had gone before. And then slowly, like some great living monster, the rock began to turn, as if it revolved upon a pivot.

It turned evenly, slowly, noiselessly, and, as it turned, the light from the lamp caused the quartz and mica and felspar in the granite to glisten like a thousand fire-flies on a summer's evening.

And then, in the moving rock itself, appeared a narrow archway about four feet across; and when this was immediately opposite the altar there was another "click" and the whole rock was still.

Those in the gallery sprang to their feet and looked on with bated breath. The thing was like a miracle. As for von Hardenberg, he gave vent to a cry that was half a cheer and half a sob. Then, snatching the lamp from the altar, he rushed through the archway into the darkness beyond.

From the gallery they could see the light grow smaller and fainter as the Prussian descended a narrow flight of steps. Then the light went out, and there came up from the vault beyond a faint cry of exultation. Captain von Hardenberg had attained the treasure of Zoroaster.

And it was at that cry that the Black Dog glided from his hiding-place. Now that the lamp had gone, the cave was darker than before. But by the light that came from above, and through the entrance, those in the gallery could see his white robes as the man glided noiselessly across the hall.

He went straight to the altar, picked up the Sunstone, raised it to his lips, and kissed it. For a moment he gazed at it, long and lovingly, before he thrust it into a pocket.

He moved on tiptoe towards the wheels. As he did so he passed through one of the shafts of light, and his features were illumined. On his face there was an expression that was diabolical. It was the face of a beast of prey, a tiger that stalks its victims. His white robes contrasted strangely with the swarthiness of his countenance. His eyes were very bright and now looked yellow like those of a cat.

When he reached the wheels, he let out a great shout that filled the vastness of the cave.

"Die!" he cried. "Die the death you merit!"

At that he set the wheels in motion, and immediately the great granite rock revolved again. And Captain Carl von Hardenberg was buried alive in the midst of the treasure that was his.

The sheikh passed rapidly down the centre aisle. Half-way to the entrance he stopped, looked back, and shook his fist at the rock.

"Lie there," he cried, "and rot! In my own good time I will return."

Before the last word was from the man's lips, Fernando had lifted his rifle and fired. The bullet flattened itself against a pillar not three inches from the Arab's head. The Black Dog glanced up at the gallery and then dashed out of the entrance, so swift and agile in his movements that it would have been sheer folly to fire again.

"You hit him?" cried Harry.

"No," cried the man, with a sullen oath. "I missed. It was too dark to see."

"Too dark to see!" repeated Harry. "But he is gone! Make haste, or he'll escape!"

CHAPTER XXVIII--A Race for Life

Fernando stood motionless, his rifle in his hand. He had been within an ace of fulfilling his oath, and sending the Arab to the shades.

"I would have hit him," he complained, "had the lamp not been taken away."

Meanwhile Cortes dashed down the steps, and crossed the central aisle to the body of the murdered man.

The madman lay quite still. A life of fasting, of penance and privation, had closed in the heroic fulfilment of his duty. With his last breath he had demanded of von Hardenberg to deliver up the Sunstone; and there he was--a huddled, formless object, lying at the foot of the altar.

The first impulse of Harry Urquhart was to follow in pursuit of the sheikh. With this intention he hastened to the terrace, whence he could see nothing. The Black Dog had vanished into the white mists that wrapped the mountain-side. By

now he was no doubt at the bottom of the great flight of steps on each side of which stood the strange, fantastic statues.

Harry, rifle in hand, was about to take up the chase, when he remembered that somewhere beyond that impenetrable granite rock was von Hardenberg--alone in the midst of the treasure.

He returned to the cave, and went to the rock and listened. He could hear nothing. Beyond, all was silent as the grave.

"What can we do?" reiterated the boy, looking about him in bewilderment.

Jim Braid went to the nine wheels and turned them at random, hoping that by chance the vault would open. In a little while he desisted and returned to Harry.

"We must follow the sheikh," said he. "We must endeavour to recover the Sunstone at every cost."

"And leave *him* here?" said Harry, with a motion of the hand towards the granite rock.

"We can do nothing," said Fernando.

"I bear the rascal no goodwill," said Harry. "He deserves but little pity. But this is terrible!" he added, and repeated the word again and again.

"Come," said Cortes, "we waste time in talking."

As he spoke, he led the way from the cave, followed by the others.

As they passed down the great flight of steps, Harry Urquhart turned and looked back. The entrance to the caves was no longer visible. A great cloud lay upon the mountain like a mantle. Near at hand, the strange beasts carved in stone were quite conspicuous and plain, but gradually, as they mounted one behind the other towards the terrace, they became lost in the mist. They resembled an army of quaint, primeval animals that were filing down from the clouds to inhabit the abodes of men.

The elder guide, shading his eyes with a hand, scanned the mountains to the north. Presently he let out a cry--a cry of exultation.

"There!" he cried, pointing across the valley.

Sure enough, far in the distance was a white speck that was moving rapidly upon the mountainside, disappearing for a moment to appear again, always bearing in the same direction--towards the north.

Cortes turned to the others.

"I can run," said he. "I was a tracker once by trade. I undertake to keep upon his trail. Do you follow as quickly as you can."

Fernando laid a hand upon his brother's shoulder.

"You will not kill him?" he said.

"No. The man's life is yours."

With these words Cortes sped upon his way, springing from boulder to

boulder, supple in figure, agile despite his wound. He had spent much of his life hunting wild game in the midst of unexplored, inhospitable hills. He was quick of eye and sure of foot.

Outrunning his companions, he went rapidly upon his way, and was soon lost to sight. All that afternoon they followed in his tracks, and towards evening they heard a shot, high up in the mountains, many miles to the north.

A grim smile passed across the face of the elder guide, who calmly turned to Harry.

"Yonder," said he, "is the sheikh."

"It was he who fired?" asked Harry.

Fernando shook his head.

"That shot was fired by my brother," he answered. "I know the sound of my brother's rifle."

"Where are we going?" asked Jim.

The half-caste shrugged his shoulders.

"The Black Dog chooses the way," said he.

"He goes to his home?" asked Harry.

"His home!" repeated Fernando. "Has the wild dog a home? Does the hare burrow in the ground? The Black Dog sleeps where he finds himself. All the world is his home. He may go into Nigeria; he may cut back to the coast; he may pass through the mountains to the great Sahara Desert. But, wherever he goes, Cortes will follow him; he will be followed to the ends of the earth. And now and again Cortes will fire his rifle to guide us on our way, to let us know that he still holds the Black Dog in view."

Throughout the days that followed, the mountains witnessed the almost superhuman efforts of two men: Sheikh Bayram, the Black Dog of the Cameroons, and Cortes, the half-caste Spaniard of the Coast.

The one fled from justice, clutching the Sunstone in his hand, and the other followed, until miles grew into leagues, until they reached the rolling grasslands to the west of Lake Chad, where cattle grazed in herds.

It was a struggle of Titans, a race for life or death between men who were well versed in the craft of the hunter, who knew each bridle-path and mountain-spring and solitary oasis between the bend of the Congo and the Atlas Mountains.

Day and night they raced onward, under the march of the southern stars. And Cortes clung to the heels of Black Dog like a leech. As often as the sheikh halted, he was obliged to push on again in greater haste.

At nightfall, every evening, Cortes fired his rifle, and this enabled his brother and the two boys to keep upon his track. The route taken by the sheikh was not a straight one: the course he followed was in the shape of the letter S. Harry and his party were often able to take short cuts, completing one side of a

triangle when the Arab and his pursuer had accomplished the other two. Thus it was that upon the twentieth day they came to the place where the younger guide was encamped.

"He is close ahead?" asked Fernando.

Cortes pointed to the west.

"He is in the valley yonder," said he. "To-night he sleeps in the jungle that lies on the edge of the plateau."

They were now in a part of the globe of which little is known. They had left the cattle far behind them. This country is uninhabited except by wild animals, and is visited only by the caravans that come south-east from Timbuctoo.

The Black Dog, with the Sunstone in his possession, still held his course towards the north, setting forth across the illimitable, barren waste. He journeyed for two days without halting. Then he crossed a river, and, passing over a plateau, descended into the true desert, where the sun blazed like a furnace.

CHAPTER XXIX--The Temple

On the skirting of the desert lay a small Arab village--a place of a few dilapidated huts, accommodating not more than a score of inhabitants. For the most part these were people sunk to the lowest depths of poverty, living in a state of dirt unimaginable to those who are not acquainted with the Arab.

To this village came Harry and Braid and the elder guide. The headman of the village came forward on their approach, followed by a few children.

Fernando, who had an intimate knowledge of Arabic, was able to act as interpreter. The headman said the village had been rich in the possession of two camels; but, late on the previous evening, an Arab had come from the plateau who had purchased one of these camels. Early that morning had come another man, a white man--as he said--who, having purchased the other, had set forward without delay in the same direction as the Arab.

"Did the second man leave no message?" asked the guide.

The villager replied that the "white man" had left word that those who followed him were to wait in the village until he returned. He expected to be back that night with news of great importance.

Accordingly they halted for the afternoon, and, giving the villagers a wide berth, camped upon the sand, lighting a fire, upon which they cooked a meal.

"And all this time," said Harry, "von Hardenberg lies buried alive, starving to death in the Caves of Zoroaster."

Fernando shook his head.

"He cannot starve," said he. "I noticed he wore a haversack well filled with provisions. And I have heard it said that inside the vault is water; a small spring bubbles up in a great basin, forming a little fountain."

"You have seen it?" asked Harry.

"No," said the man; "but I know what I say is true. And, even were there no water in the cave, the Prussian carried a water-bottle."

Harry Urquhart sighed.

"All this is like a dream," he exclaimed.

"The scoundrel deserves no better fate," said the guide, hard of heart and pitiless where his enemies were concerned.

At nightfall they lay down to sleep, Jim Braid remaining on sentry for the earlier part of the night. They had small reason to trust the people of the village, who were not incapable of murdering them in the night for the sake of their possessions.

At about ten o'clock Jim was alarmed by a peculiar grating sound quite near to their camp. The moon had not yet risen, and, though he strained his eyes in the direction from which the sound had come, he was able to distinguish nothing. At last he rose to his feet and walked some little distance from the fire. There he discovered a camel lying down upon the ground, engaged in chewing a bundle of coarse hay. The camel had appeared as if by magic.

Jim returned to the fire, and there to his amazement found Cortes sitting before the embers.

"You have returned?" said he.

"Yes, I have returned."

"With news?"

"Of the Black Dog. Yonder in the desert is an ancient temple or mosque. It stands in an oasis where there are palm-trees, and around which melons grow. For many years it has been deserted. The sheikh himself is there."

"We must awaken the others," said Braid.

"There is plenty of time," said the man. "He will not move before daybreak. The night is yet young. We will surround the oasis at sunrise and take him alive. Fernando must fulfil the oath he has made to the saints."

Jim Braid had not such patience. With this news upon his mind he could not stay idle while Harry and Fernando were asleep. Despite the advice of Cortes, he awoke them both, and told them what had happened.

"We must start at once!" cried Harry.

"There is no haste," said Fernando, with a shrug of his shoulders. "But, if you wish it, we will go."

They packed up their camp equipment and provisions, and their reserve ammunition, and these they loaded upon the camel. Then they set forward on their way, following a caravan route, whilst a full moon, red as blood, crept over the horizon and illumined the wasteland like a lantern.

In three hours they came to a place where a stone building, surrounded by a dozen trees, stood forth against the moonlight. Near by a hyena howled.

"The sheikh is within," said Cortes.

Drawing a little distance away, the four held consultation together. As far as they could make out, there was but one entrance to the temple, which was half in ruins. For all that, they thought it best to surround the place, and it was finally agreed that Harry Urquhart should enter the building, revolver in hand, whilst the other three guarded the walls to prevent the Arab's escape, should they have overlooked some other means of exit.

Leaving his rifle behind, with his revolver ready loaded in his hand, Harry passed on tiptoe through the entrance and found himself in a shallow, darkened chamber.

Though there was no roof to the building, the adjacent palm-trees shut out the light of the moon, and some seconds elapsed before the boy's eyes grew accustomed to the semi-darkness.

As far as he could make out, he was surrounded by high walls. Scattered here and there about the floor, upon which the sand of the desert lay like a thick, luxurious carpet, were great cylindrical boulders, which, in former times, had evidently composed the pillars that supported the roof. In the shadow of these boulders it was quite dark, and each shadow was large enough to conceal the form of a man.

The boy decided to act with caution. With such an opponent as the sheikh he knew he would be called upon to exercise not only promptitude but cunning. It had not been without difficulty that he had managed to persuade the guides to allow him to enter the temple. Fernando, who was filled with a strong desire for vengeance, had wished for the honour for himself. But Harry, as the leader of the expedition, would not give way, agreeing that the moment he fired the elder guide should hasten to his assistance.

Ready to fire at a moment's notice, Harry set about a systematic search of the ruined temple. Starting from the entrance, he worked his way around the walls, holding as much as possible to the shadows. He looked behind each boulder, he searched each crevice that appeared large enough to admit the body of a man. In the end he returned to the entrance. The place was evidently deserted.

His first thought was to leave the building, to tell Cortes that he had been mistaken, that the sheikh was not there; but then he remembered how seldom the judgment of either of the guides had been at fault, and, assuring himself that he had overlooked some hiding-place, he began his search anew.

He came to a place where a clump of cactus was growing against the wall, and here he discovered what he had not noticed before. Under the cactus plant was a little archway, a kind of tunnel, large enough to admit a man crawling on hands and knees.

The boy was in two minds what to do. It was one thing to search from boulder to boulder, ready to fire at a moment's notice; it was another to go head foremost on all-fours into what might prove to be a trap. If the Arab was hiding on the other side of the wall, beyond the cactus-bush--a stroke of the knife, and the matter would be ended. The boy had need of all the courage he possessed. To go back to Jim and the two guides would be to confess himself afraid.

Taking a deep breath, like a man about to dive, he lay flat upon his face, and as silently as possible worked his way forward through the sand, which was still warm from the rays of the sun of the preceding day.

If there were many holes in the wall such as this, it was well three of them had remained on guard without. Had all four entered the temple at once, the sheikh, if he lay anywhere in hiding, had a sure way of escape. Harry had no means of knowing whether the hole led to the desert or to an inner room.

On the other side of the wall it was quite dark. The boy looked overhead, and was able to see that he was sheltered by a roof--a roof in which there were great holes, through which he could see the stars. He could do nothing as yet, until his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness.

For some moments he lay still, his heart thumping against his ribs, straining his ears to catch the slightest sound. From somewhere quite near at hand, at first almost imperceptible but gradually growing louder, came a low, soft, vibrating noise that seemed to proceed from somewhere under the ground.

Harry thought he had heard something like it before; he could not remember where. It was like the droning of a monster bee, or the noise of a kettle on the point of boiling over, or else the purring of a cat.

How long the sound continued he was never able to say. It seemed to him that he lay for an eternity, breathless, waiting for something to happen, with the sound continuously in his ears. And then he became aware of two great, yellow eyes, staring in the darkness, immobile, like flaming lamps.

CHAPTER XXX--The Blood Spoor

On the spur of the moment he snatched his revolver, levelled it, and fired.

There was a prolonged, piercing shriek, as a dark mass, blacker than the shadows, sprang high into the air.

Harry lay quite still; fear at last possessed him. The loud report of his revolver was still singing in his ears; and, before silence reigned again, it was as if the whole place, even the very walls, were possessed of life.

Dark shadows were moving everywhere. All about the boy were yellow, staring eyes, that dilated and grew smaller in the darkness. And then Harry became conscious of a fierce, growling sound.

As far as he was able to make out, this proceeded from the largest pair of eyes, immediately before him. And it was this that gave him the first inkling as to the solution of the mystery: he had crept into a den of savage beasts.

The largest pair of eyes drew nearer, and suddenly dropped lower, almost to the level of the ground. The brute was about to spring.

There was a snarl. As quick as lightning Harry sprang aside.

The great beast collided with the wall with such force that the roof--or as much of it as remained--came down with a crash upon the ground, and Harry found himself buried in a mass of debris and dust.

He tried to move, but found he was unable to do so. A heavy beam lay across his chest. With the exception of his head and shoulders he was buried in the wreckage.

As the dust cleared, the place became illumined by the moonshine. On the sudden disappearance of the roof, the light from without had been admitted to the darkened chamber. At once Harry was able to see quite distinctly, and the sight that he beheld was sufficiently alarming to shake the nerves of even the strongest man.

Pinned to the ground, unable to move, he found himself in the midst of a family of leopards. Quite near to him, also half buried in the wreckage, lay the beast that he had shot--evidently the father of the family. Six cubs, half-grown, growled and snarled on the other side of the chamber, and in front of them, her white fangs gleaming in the moonlight, was the mother leopard, fiercely guarding her young.

It was she who had hurled herself at the wall, who had brought down the roof, and who now snarled repeatedly at the boy. It was apparent that the sudden collapse of the building had given the animal a fright. Twice she made as if she would advance, and twice drew back towards her young.

Harry was not able to fire again. The hand which held his revolver was pinned down beneath the fallen beam. He could not move his eyes from the leopard. At the same time, the brute feared to advance.

A sharp jet of fire--it seemed not two paces from the boy's face--a loud report, and the leopard rose upon its hind legs, rampant, terrible and glorious, fighting the air with its fore feet as if in the throes of a struggle with an invisible, all-powerful foe.

[image]

THE LEOPARD ROSE UPON ITS HIND LEGS, RAMPANT, TERRIBLE, AND GLORIOUS

Then the brute came down and lay quite still, shot through the brain by a bullet from Jim Braid's rifle.

Quick upon Jim's heels, through the narrow opening in the wall, came the two guides, Cortes leading the way.

"Are you hurt?" asked Jim.

"No," said Harry. "I am not hurt. But get me out of this; I can't move."

With quick hands they lifted the beams and rafters that pinned the boy to the ground, and, a moment after, Harry was on his feet.

The young leopards gathered together in a corner of the chamber. Then, one after the other, they sprang over the ruined wall like cats, and disappeared into the night.

"The sheikh!" cried Fernando. "Where is he?"

"I have not seen him," answered Harry.

"He came here to-day," said Cortes, "and pitched his camp. Look here, what's that?"

He pointed to the ground, where lay something that was white as snow. It was a bone.

The two boys drew back in horror. Fernando was undismayed. He calmly picked up the bone and examined it in the moonlight.

"This is the shin-bone of a camel," said he. "Moreover, of a camel that was killed to-day. As my brother says, the Black Dog was here."

"See this!" cried Cortes. "The ground is charred. It was here he lit his fire."

All four searched the chamber. Besides the shin-bone, they found other evidence that could not be disputed: four hoofs and a piece of the Arab's white flowing robe.

"Has the man been killed?" cried Jim.

"It seems that that is so."

"But the Sunstone!" Harry exclaimed.

"This evidence," said Fernando, "is indisputable. The Black Dog came here by day, pitched his camp, and lit his fire. When his fire burned out he fell asleep. He had had no sleep for forty-eight hours, and must have been exhausted. It was whilst he was asleep that the leopards entered. It seems I have been robbed of my revenge."

Harry looked at the man.

"So you think," said he, "that the sheikh is dead?"

Fernando pointed to the strip of the Arab's clothes, and shrugged his shoulders. "At all events," said he, "the camel he purchased in the village fell a prey to the leopards."

"But," exclaimed Harry, "how could the camel have got here. We were obliged to crawl in on hand and knees."

Fernando laughed.

"The leopards slew the camel outside," said he. "They tore it to pieces, which they dragged in here to play with. Have you never watched a cat?"

"Then," cried Harry, "the Sunstone has been lost!"

"Have patience," said Fernando. "We may find it yet. We will get out of this place and wait for dawn. When the daylight comes we will search the ruins. There is no need as yet to despair."

This advice was good. They went out together, leaving by way of the little archway half-hidden by the cactus plant. On the sand of the desert they lay down side by side, and, whilst one acted as sentry, the others slept.

As soon as the sun began to rise in the east, Fernando rose to his feet.

"Come," said he, "we will search."

They looked everywhere. Under the palm-trees, the sand was all disturbed where the eight leopards had flung themselves upon the camel. Around the trunk of one of the trees was a rope which had been gnawed in half. In the inner chamber of the temple no further evidence was forthcoming, and this was in part due to the fact that the ground was covered with the wreckage of the roof. It was the

younger guide who discovered in the outer chamber a drop of blood upon the stones.

The man evidently considered that he had found a clue of great importance; but to the two boys it seemed quite obvious that this was the blood of the camel that had been dragged piecemeal through the narrow opening.

"No," said Cortes, shaking his head. "These are small drops of blood. It is possible the Black Dog is still alive."

At that he turned upon his heel and set off at a jog-trot across the plain. When he was a long way off, they saw him waving his arms frantically, in the highest state of excitement.

They ran to the place where he was, and found him pointing to the ground.

"Look there!" he cried. "I was right. The sheikh has escaped!"

Sure enough, upon the soft sand was a line of footmarks, leading in the direction of the plateau. Every now and again the trail was marked by a small drop of blood.

Harry asked for an explanation.

"It is very simple," answered Cortes. "The leopards first attacked the camel, which was tethered to a palm-tree outside the temple. The Black Dog was awakened from his sleep and endeavoured to escape. As he fled from the entrance he must have encountered a leopard. His cloak was torn, but he escaped, bearing the marks of the leopard's teeth or claws, probably in his thigh. Wounded, he has gone back to the hills, knowing that there lies his only chance of safety."

The man was certain of his facts. Moreover, the evidence of the foot-marks and the blood spoor was too strong to be denied.

"Come!" cried Fernando. "He is as good as ours, unless he is only slightly hurt."

CHAPTER XXXI--The Fox in View

Before the heat of the day had arisen, Harry, Jim Braid, and the two guides had covered many miles across the desert, leaving the Arab village to their left. All

this time it was easy to follow the track of the sheikh. The Black Dog evidently suffered pain, and progressed only with the greatest difficulty; for, as they went on, his footsteps became more irregular, as though he staggered when he walked.

Indeed, the whole thing was like the hunting of a wounded deer. It is a well-known fact that all wounded animals take to higher ground, because there they know they are more likely to be safe, since there are usually hiding-places in the mountains--crannies in the rocks, and caves. And besides, it is good to lay down one's life a little nearer to the stars.

The desert ended suddenly in a great expanse of scrub, bordering the plateau, where the ground was stony, and where the foot-marks of the sheikh were no longer visible. For some miles the two guides held the track, until they came to a place where the fugitive had halted by the side of a little stream. Here he had washed and bathed his wounds; he had torn strips from his clothing, making bandages for himself. He had gone down upon his knees at the side of the stream and had drunk the fresh water from his hands. Then he had continued on his way, invigorated and refreshed, making straight towards the Maziri mountains.

Soon after that they were obliged to leave the camel to browse upon the hill-side. The ground had become so steep and broken that the animal could advance but slowly. They off-loaded the provisions and ammunition and divided these equally among the party.

Presently they climbed the lower slopes of the mountains, where the country was much intersected by strips of forest and dried-up watercourses, with here and there a patch of sand--a kind of offshoot of the desert. There was no longer any trail to follow.

The Black Dog had chosen his way with sagacity, walking upon stony ground, where his sandals left no marks. For all that both Cortes and Fernando were confident that they would overtake him. However, to make the more sure of their victim, they decided to divide their forces, Harry and the elder man going one way, and Jim and Cortes another.

Late that afternoon, Harry and his companion had attained a great height on the ridge of the mountains. Before them extended a great valley, and it was on the other side of this that they beheld a white figure moving rapidly from rock to rock, bearing steadily towards the east.

The guide lifted his rifle and fired in the air.

"That is to warn my brother," said he. "He will know the signal. This time it is you and I who lead the chase."

He set off running down the mountain-side, springing from boulder to boulder. There was no foot-path, and the way was almost precipitous; but the man, though not so sure of foot as his brother, was as agile as a panther. In fact, it was as much as Harry could do to keep up with him. The half-caste was all impatience

to overtake the fugitive.

The sheikh was no longer in sight, nor was there any sign of Jim and the younger guide, when the sun sank beyond the mountains, and the shadows of night crept into the valleys with the mists. For all that, Fernando held upon his way until long after dark, until at last Harry was obliged to call upon him to halt. The boy was utterly exhausted. Since daybreak that morning they had travelled without a halt, and must have covered nearly forty miles, over country that was rugged, wild, and pathless.

The guide agreed to halt, but would permit no fire. Harry appeased his appetite with some wild fruit he had procured on the margin of the desert, and then lay down to sleep. In less than a minute he was buried in the deepest slumber.

It seemed to him he had not been sleeping for more than an hour when the guide took him by the shoulder and shook him lightly.

Harry Urquhart looked about him.

"It is still dark," said he.

"The dawn comes," said the man, as if that clinched the matter once and for all.

"Have you not slept?" asked Harry.

"Does the hound sleep," said Fernando, with a grim smile, "with the fox in view? Remember, I have sworn to the saints."

When they had eaten such of the desert fruit as remained over from the previous day, they set forward on their journey, the guide leading as before.

They traversed valley after valley, the guide selecting the route, as it seemed, by some kind of natural instinct similar to that which will lead a cat to find its way across unknown country. Though during that morning they saw nothing of the Arab, Fernando was certain that the Black Dog was not many miles ahead. Every time they reached a hill-top, he screened his eyes with a hand and examined the surrounding country for signs of the fugitive, who, they were convinced, was making back to the Caves of Zoroaster.

They were returning to the hills of Maziriland by a route that lay far to the south of that of their former journey. The mountains here were not so high as those farther to the north. For all that, they were exceedingly desolate and rugged. They were in a land where nothing appeared to live. There were no villages; neither cattle nor sheep grazed upon the lowlands.

At midday the guide caught sight of the sheikh, still bearing towards the south-east. His white robes were conspicuous at a distance.

On the opposite side of the valley in which they found themselves, the man was hurrying forward along a ledge that did not appear to be more than a few feet across, that hung--as it were--between earth and sky. Beneath this ledge, the smooth face of a precipice dropped sheer to the depths of the valley; above, the

same inaccessible cliff continued, rising upward to the clouds.

"If Cortes were only here," said the half-caste, "the task would be easy; the Black Dog would be ours."

"Where is your brother?" asked Harry.

"I am inclined to think he is somewhere toward the north. For the last three days the wind has been blowing from that direction. Had he been to the south he must have heard the shot I fired, in which case he would have caught us up."

"Perhaps," said Harry, "he returns by the way we came."

"It may be," said the guide. "Sooner or later, he will discover his mistake. Then he will come south; but he and Braid will be many miles in rear of us. If Cortes were with me now, I could capture the sheikh before sunset."

"How?"

"You see where he is," said the guide, pointing across the valley. "He walks on the brink of one precipice and at the foot of another. He can turn neither to the right nor to the left. He must either go straight on or else turn back. My brother can run faster than you or I. If he were with us, I would send him down the valley in all haste, to ascend the mountain-path in advance of the sheikh; whilst I would mount to the path at this end of the valley. Thus the Black Dog would be caught between us two."

Harry looked at the great, yawning abyss that arose before them like a mighty wall. The figure of Bayram was not more than two miles away. In mid-valley was a stream that flowed through a narrow strip of grassland, upon which it would be possible to run.

"I may not be able to run as fast as your brother," said he, turning to the guide, "but I think I can overtake the sheikh."

Fernando laughed.

"I think so too," said he. "As for me, though I can climb for many hours, I am no runner on the flat. Do you, therefore, set forth upon your way. At the foot of the valley you will see that the precipice ends; a spur of rock juts out. If you reach that place before the sheikh, you will be able to climb up to the path at the top of the precipice. There you will lie in wait for him. I will follow in his rear. He will be caught between two fires."

As there was little time to lose, Harry was not slow to obey the man's injunctions. Side by side they climbed down into the valley, and there they separated, Fernando going to the north, Harry Urquhart setting out in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER XXXII--Between Two Fires

In less than an hour Harry drew level with the Arab. The progress of the Black Dog was necessarily slow. In the first place, he still suffered from his wound; in the second place, the path he followed was in places so narrow as to be dangerous, and he was obliged to proceed with the utmost caution. Harry, on the other hand, had been able to run as fast as his legs could carry him by the side of the stream that rushed down from the mountains.

The boy paused for breath and looked about him. Though he and the sheikh were making for the same point, in regard to which they were level with one another, there was more than a mile between them. In other words, that was the distance that separated the precipice from the stream in mid-valley. Harry looked up and saw Fernando far in rear. He had already gained the path at the top of the abyss, and was following with all dispatch upon the heels of the fugitive.

The Black Dog stopped. His small white figure seemed to be crouching. Harry, with the aid of his field-glasses, tried to make out what the man was doing.

At that moment there came a quick, hissing sound within a fraction of an inch of the boy's ear, and a bullet buried itself deep in the ground not fifteen yards away.

Without a doubt, the sheikh now realized to the full the danger in which he stood. He saw that he was rapidly being cut off from all means of escape. There was nothing that could save him but his surety of aim, and at that distance it was no easy matter to hit a mark several hundred feet below him.

When a rifle is fired downward from a great height, what is known as the "trajectory", or flight, of the bullet is affected, and in consequence the line of sight is not wholly accurate. This may have been sufficient to account for the failure of the Arab's shot; but in any case, to put a bullet within an inch of the target at so great a range proved him a marksman of the greatest skill.

When he saw that he had missed he hurried on his way, hoping against hope to reach the spur in advance of Harry Urquhart.

The boy was determined that the fugitive should not escape. He cared little or nothing for the life of Bayram, but at all costs he meant, if possible, to recover the Sunstone. He was never able to forget that, all this time, von Hardenberg was shut up alive in the silent vault, in the very heart of the mountain.

Running as if his life depended on his efforts, he dashed down the valley. Three times the Black Dog fired, and each time the bullet flew within a hand's-breadth of its mark.

On gaining the spur, Harry clambered to the southern side, where he was out of sight of the fugitive, who was now too far away to fire. Slinging his rifle across his shoulder, hand over hand the boy climbed up the rocks, and at last gained the pathway which formed a little ledge, or terrace, upon the face of the great abyss.

He walked forward stealthily. On his right hand a rock arose, inaccessible and smooth as a plate of steel, whilst on the left it dropped sheer into the shadowy depths of the valley from which he had come. Far below him, the stream that he had followed looked like a little silver thread glittering in the sunlight.

He knew that he must find some kind of cover. If he came face to face with Black Dog on that narrow path he would have little chance of living. A rifle in the sheikh's hands, at a point-blank range, was more an implement of execution than a weapon of defence; and, besides, the Black Dog was known to be a man of prodigious strength.

As the boy went upon his way he looked forward eagerly, hoping to find some rock or boulder behind which he could hide and await the approach of the Arab. But the path was bare, not only of vegetation, but of stones and fragments of rock. It was as if some mighty hurricane had swept the mountain-side, brushing all obstacles from the narrow ledge, sweeping the place as clean as the pavement of a street.

Presently the path turned a sharp angle. The cliff stood folded back in the shape of the letter W. From the corner, Harry was able to see, not only the other extremity of the W, but also the smaller salient which formed the centre of the letter. It was then that the complete success of their enterprise was made apparent.

At the corner of the southern extremity was Harry, and at the northern stood the guide, his rifle in his hand. Between them the face of the precipice was folded back in two re-entrant angles. Everywhere the abyss was smooth and perpendicular, both above and below the pathway. It was possible to climb neither up nor down. Escape was beyond all question. And midway between Harry Urquhart and the half-caste guide, standing upright at the central angle, was Sheikh Bayram, the Black Dog of the Cameroons, like a great bird of prey

perched above its eyrie. Whatever the issue of this business was to be, it was certain that for the present the fugitive was caught.

Neither was it possible for him to conceal himself. If he turned back, he was exposed to fire from the guide; if he went forward, he was covered by the rifle of Harry.

He stood motionless for some seconds, as if deliberating in his mind what was best to do. Then, with a slow and measured step, he walked towards the boy.

Harry waited till the man had come within twenty yards of him; then he raised his rifle to his shoulder and directed the sights full upon the Arab's heart. To his amazement, the Black Dog stood stock-still.

Harry was about to press the trigger when, for two reasons, he desisted. Firstly, the thing smacked of a cold-blooded murder, since the sheikh had made no show of resistance; secondly, if he fired and killed the man, his lifeless body would pitch headlong into the abyss. In that case they might not be able to recover it, and thus the Sunstone would be lost.

Suddenly the sheikh raised his rifle above his head, and cried aloud to the boy in English.

"Fire," said he, "and kill me! I am at your mercy; my life is in your hands. See here, this rifle--it has served me well for twenty years. It is known from Lagos to Port Stanley, even as far south as the Kasai. Behold, there goes my best and truest friend."

At that he cast the weapon to the depths below.

"You surrender?" cried Harry, coming forward.

"I can do nothing else," replied the sheikh. "As you ran in the valley I fired my last cartridge. Still, I am not yours so long as I am alive."

With these last words, he turned sharply and looked behind him, as if he had heard something. There, sure enough, was Fernando, crawling on hands and knees, his head and shoulders just appearing around the central angle.

CHAPTER XXXIII--On the Brink of Eternity

The Black Dog folded his arms, threw back his head, and laughed.

The guide came wriggling like a snake, working himself forward upon his elbows and his knees, almost flat upon his face, which was little raised above the ground. His dark features were expressionless. Upon his countenance was visible no sign of triumph, no elation at a victory that was well within his grasp. As he came nearer and nearer his dark eyes never moved from the stern face of the Arab sheikh.

Then slowly he rose to his feet, bringing the butt of his rifle into the hollow of his shoulder.

"Bayram," said he in a deep voice, "make your peace with the Almighty God, for you are about to die!"

The Arab extended his arms in the direction of the east. Beyond the mountains, on the far horizon, the sun was setting in a glow of crimson glory. The great hills stood forth before the sunset like the thrones of giants, their irregular, rugged outline a deep leaden colour where they were not wrapped in gathering clouds.

The Black Dog lifted his voice so that it carried far across the valley.

"Without repentance," said he, "I go into the shades. I have sometimes acted unwisely, for human flesh is weak, and man cannot have the wisdom of Allah, whose prophet is Mohammed. But for such false steps as I have taken I am ready to pay the price. Come, fire, and have done with it! I do not fear to die."

There was no question that Fernando was about to fire, when Harry cried out in the nick of time.

"The Sunstone!" he exclaimed.

The sheikh turned to the boy and smiled, his white teeth showing in his beard. Then he thrust a hand into a pocket and drew forth the Sunstone, which

he held to the light, so that the yellow jade caught the reflection of the dying sun and looked like the most magnificent of opals.

"Here it is," said he. And then to the guide: "Will you take this in exchange for a human life? I am ready to strike a bargain."

Fernando shook his head.

"Do as he bids you," pleaded Harry, who was not only anxious to recover the Sunstone at every cost, but who had no liking for this business, which was in the nature of a common execution.

"I have sworn an oath," said the guide in measured tones. "The Black Dog must die."

With these words he approached, until he was quite near to the Arab. It was no doubt his intention to shoot the man and then grasp his robes to prevent his lifeless body from falling over the cliff. Be that as it may, he failed in his enterprise, for the sheikh was possessed of the supple activity of a tiger as well as the cunning of a wolf.

Fernando raised his rifle. He was then not ten feet from the Arab. And even as he pressed the trigger the Black Dog sprang upon him, striking the barrel of the rifle upward, so that the shot flew high in the air.

A second later the two men were locked together in a death-grip, each struggling desperately for life.

The sheikh was the stronger of the two, but he suffered from his wound. Not only was he somewhat weakened by loss of blood, but his right leg, the flesh of which had been torn by the leopard's fangs, was stiff and aching from the great fatigue of the journey across the mountains.

Harry put down his rifle and came forward in all haste, his revolver in his hand. He desired to give what help he could to the guide, but this was no easy matter.

The two men were like fighting cats. First one was on the top and then the other. They rolled over and over so rapidly, and were so closely interlocked, that it was almost impossible to tell which was the guide and which the sheikh. Sometimes they struggled at the foot of the cliff; at others they were on the very edge of the precipice, and both seemed in imminent danger of falling into the depths.

"Help!" let out Fernando in the voice of one who choked. "He fights like a demon possessed!"

Harry, in desperation, hurled his weight upon the two, and at once found his strength of small avail. He was tossed hither and thither, and was more than once in danger of being hurled over the edge.

At last, not without difficulty, he disengaged himself, recognizing that he did no further good than risk his life. He saw also that his revolver was quite

useless. He dared not fire, even at the closest range.

It was then that Fernando somehow managed to release the other's hold, and sprang sharply to his feet. The sheikh was on him again like a wild cat, and had him by the throat. Putting forth the whole of his colossal strength, the Black Dog forced the other backward.

Nearer and nearer to the edge of the precipice the four feet shuffled, until the guide actually tottered on the brink.

Harry stood by--a helpless spectator, petrified with horror. The terror of the situation had taken his breath away. It was as if he had lost all power and all sensation of his limbs. Then, with a loud cry, Fernando, hurled from the Black Dog's powerful grasp, plunged feet foremost over the cliff.

And as he fell he grasped the air with frantic, clutching hands, in an agony of brief despair. His left fist closed upon nothing, but his right laid hold upon the long, flowing robes of his opponent.

On the instant the Black Dog was jerked off his feet. He tried to save himself by throwing his weight backward--a quick, spasmodic action that proved that he retained his presence of mind to the end. He was too late, however. His shoulder struck the tooth-like edge of the precipice--and, in a flash, he was gone.

Harry Urquhart felt the strength suddenly go from his knees. Unable any longer to stand, he sank down into a sitting position on the narrow, perilous path. His heart was beating like a hammer; for a moment he thought that he would faint.

He dared not look down into the abyss. It was all too horrible to think of. He sat still and listened, while the sun sank beyond the mountains, and darkness crept into the valley. A great silence reigned among the hills that was like the silence of the tomb.

CHAPTER XXXIV--The Sunstone Found

More than an hour elapsed before Harry Urquhart had the power to move. The whole tragedy had been far more terrible than any nightmare, and yet he felt just

like a little child that awakens suddenly in the night, to find himself still confronted with those horrid possibilities that can only occur in dreams.

Night crept into the valley from the east. The glow in the heavens died out, and one by one the stars appeared, and a great full moon, luminous and white. The boy crept to the edge of the precipice and looked over. He could see nothing; it was too dark to see. The whole valley was still.

This silence was fearful in itself. It seemed to Harry that he was the only living thing in the world. There were no voices in the night; in the valley there was no sound of bird or beast or human being.

Harry rose to his feet, and, step by step, aided by the moonlight, cautiously returned to the spur by way of which he had come. He was still quite unnerved. He dared not go near the edge of the precipice; as he advanced he clutched the mountain-side. When he came to the spur he clambered down among the rocks in such haste that the perspiration stood in beads upon his brow. And then a feeling of weakness overcame him again; and, seating himself upon the ground, he endeavoured to think matters out.

He tried to realize the full significance of what had happened. Fernando had fulfilled his oath: he had brought about the death of the Black Dog of the Cameroons. But he himself had perished also, and the Sunstone had been lost. And all had happened in the space of a few seconds, about which it was terrifying even to think.

Above all else, Harry Urquhart wanted someone to talk to; he wanted to hear the sound of a human voice. He was still like a child awakened from a nightmare. The loneliness of this great, howling wilderness was crushing, overpowering. With his nerves overwrought, his courage shaken, the eternal silence got the better of his feelings, and suddenly, burying his face in his hands, he burst forth into tears.

He knew not why he cried. His tears were not tears of sorrow. He cried because he had passed through a great ordeal, because he had been face to face with Death. And, in that sense, every teardrop was the word of a prayer to the God who controls the destinies of men.

Then, mastering his emotion, he rose to his feet and went on--he knew not whither. After a time he came to a stream, and there he stopped, wondering what to do.

There was food in his haversack, but he felt no inclination to eat. He went down on his knees, and drank deeply. The water was very cold.

When he had quenched his thirst, which was like the thirst that accompanies a fever, he felt refreshed. He even scorned himself for having been so weak. It was then that he looked about him.

He was shut in on all sides by the great inhospitable mountains. Above was

a clear sky, bespangled with a multitude of stars, in the midst of which the full moon shone down into the valley. Then he saw another star, solitary, large as a planet, lower than the others. It was a star that seemed to shine from out of the heart of the mountains.

It was some minutes before he realized what it was. Then the truth came upon him as in a flash. It was not a star at all, but a camp-fire that was burning on the hill-side.

The thought that he was not alone in this desolate and silent region was like the nectar of the gods to one who is faint and weary. The boy cared not in the least who camped on the mountainside; he decided to find out for himself. If they were savages, they could murder him; it would matter little to him. If they were friendly, they might allow him to warm himself by the side of the glowing embers. At any rate he would hear some kind of human speech.

It took him three hours to reach the fire, where he found two men, seated facing one another. A cry of exultation escaped his lips when he recognized Jim Braid and the younger guide.

At once Cortes sprang to his feet as if alarmed.

"Where is my brother?" he asked.

Harry tried to speak, but was not able to do so. He sank down by the side of the fire.

"Some calamity has happened!"

Harry bowed his head.

"And the Black Dog?" asked Cortes.

"He also is dead," said Harry, speaking for the first time.

"Dead!" cried Cortes, without expression in his voice.

"Yes," said Harry. "And the Sunstone is lost, and von Hardenberg will starve to death in the Caves of Zoroaster."

Cortes seated himself once more upon the ground, extending his hands towards the fire. There were no tears in his eyes; his voice was without a tremor.

"When you feel able to do so," said he, turning his face to Harry, "will you please tell me what happened."

Harry related the story from beginning to end. He told how Fernando and himself had followed the sheikh across the mountains, and of how they had run the man to earth upon a narrow ledge at the top of an enormous cliff. He then described the struggle that had taken place, with its grim and terrible conclusion.

When the boy had finished speaking, Cortes looked up at the moon.

"In four hours," said he, "it will be daylight. We can do nothing till then. When the dawn comes we will search for the bodies."

At that he lay down upon the ground, but it was evident he had no intention of going to sleep.

He had shown little or no emotion on hearing of his brother's death. There was black blood in his veins, and, with the more savage races, death is a simple and everyday affair. For all that, there is no reason to suppose that he did not feel the great loss he had sustained.

A long time elapsed before Harry, too, was able to sleep. And, when at last he did so, he was for ever struggling on the brink of an unfathomable abyss, so that he was little rested when at daybreak he was awakened by Cortes.

Without waiting for food, they set out at once upon their way, passing slowly down the hill-side. They soon reached the stream, and thence turned to the south. It was Harry who led the way. When he judged that they were parallel to the place where the tragedy had happened, they crossed the stream and walked straight for the cliff.

At the foot of the precipice was a kind of terrace, upon which grew scattered trees, about the roots of one of which were boulders. Lying on his back, across one of these rocks, they found the body of the Black Dog of the Cameroons.

The two boys looked away whilst the guide examined the body, and then, stooping, picked up something from the ground. Presently Cortes touched Harry on the arm.

The boy turned and set eyes upon the Sunstone.

CHAPTER XXXV--A Brother

Leaving the body of the wretched man where they found it, they continued to search among the trees; but nowhere could they discover any trace of the elder guide.

"His body cannot be far away," said Harry. "They fell together."

It was then that, at the sound of a faint cry from somewhere far above them, all three looked up. And the sight they beheld was appalling.

Hundreds of feet above the place where they stood, sheltered by a cranny in the face of the cliff, there grew a gnarled and twisted shrub, a kind of withered tree. In the midst of this, caught like a fish in a net, was a man who, even as they watched him, moved, twisting like a thing in pain.

Cortes scanned the face of the cliff; but, look where he might, he could

discover no way by which it was possible to ascend to the place where his brother was suspended in mid-air.

Running back several yards, he regarded the precipice above the withered tree. It was equally inaccessible from above. Then he raised his hands to his mouth and cried out in a loud voice, calling upon his brother by name.

The answer came in a voice so weak that Cortes had to hold a hand to an ear in order to catch the words.

"I am in pain. My arm is broken. Can you not come to my assistance?"

The younger brother looked about him in despair.

"Can nothing be done?" asked Harry.

"Let me think," said Cortes, and lifted a hand to his eyes. On a sudden he cried out to his brother. "Can you hold out for two days?" he asked.

"For two days!" came the answer. "It is too long."

"You must!" cried the other. "Take the belt from your waist and bind yourself to the tree. Then, when your strength is gone, you will not fall."

Whilst the elder man obeyed these injunctions, Harry turned to Cortes.

"What do you intend to do?" he asked.

"We have no rope," said the guide. "Fernando is at least fifty feet from the path above, and there is no rope fifty feet in length nearer to this place than Kano or Sokoto. However, there is--as you know--a rope-like creeper that grows in the bush. I intend to go back as far as the jungle."

"Can you get there in time?" asked Braid, incredulously.

"My wound is now healed," said the man, "my strength returned. I can but do my best."

Cortes looked up again at his brother.

"Courage!" he cried. "In two days I return."

So saying, he bounded off upon his way. As they watched him pass down the valley, springing from rock to rock, it was apparent that he meant to do all that was humanly possible to effect the salvation of his brother. Even as they looked, his figure grew smaller in the distance, and in a few minutes he was lost to view.

To describe in detail the journey of the younger guide across the mountains would be tedious. The thing can be summed up in a few words: it was magnificent, heroic. Mile upon mile he covered without pausing for breath. For the most part he kept to the valleys, where the atmosphere was stifling and humid, crossing the mountains only when by doing so he could cut off several miles.

He had food with him, but he seldom stopped to eat. Now and again he drank at a mountain stream, but seemed to grudge the time even for this.

At sunset he was still bearing onward. He had cast aside the greater part of his clothing, and the perspiration poured off him, and the veins stood out upon his temples like knotted strands of cord. For all that, he went on and on beneath

the stars, whilst the moon marched in the heavens. It was a race for the life of his brother.

As Cortes hastened on his way, his thoughts continually went back to the perilous situation in which he had left Fernando, and every thought was, as it were, a spur to his endeavour. No sooner had he pictured in his mind's eye that struggling, writhing figure, hanging, as it were, betwixt earth and sky, than he shot forward with renewed energy, clenching both fists and teeth in his strong determination.

At last, breathless, exhausted, he sighted the extremity of the great West African bush. Through this, forcing his way among the thickets, so that the sharp thorns tore his naked flesh, he was obliged to travel for many miles before he found the right kind of creeping plant, and, moreover, one long enough to suit his purpose.

To cut this from the tree around which it was twined, and roll it into a great coil which he suspended around his neck, was the work of not many minutes; and then he set forth upon his return journey to the margin of the desert.

He was already much exhausted, and his load was very heavy. But hour by hour he struggled onward, leaving the jungle far behind, mounting to higher altitudes. Nightfall found him still upon his way. Repeatedly he stumbled, and then, on a sudden, he fell full length upon the ground.

He lay quite still for several seconds, then rose slowly to his knees, lifting his eyes and hands towards the stars. For a moment he prayed silently; and, seeming to gather courage from his prayer, he rose to his feet and went on.

Soon after midnight the sky became overcast. A high wind got up and blew from the mountains, bitter cold after the tropic heat of the bush. Then the skies opened and the rain came down in sheets. But Cortes still held on, struggling towards his goal, fighting manfully against his own failing strength.

And in the meantime, throughout these two fearful days, Jim Braid and Harry waited in suspense. They could do nothing to help the man who hung, hour after hour, upon the brink of the other world.

Acting on his brother's advice, Fernando had undone the belt around his waist, and with this had lashed himself to the stoutest branch of the tree. Words fail to describe the torture he must have suffered; for, not only did he endure great pain from his broken arm, but he was tormented by a raging thirst. His cries for water were piteous to hear.

They had no means of assisting him. They could do nothing but look on in helplessness, praying for the return of the younger brother. On the second night the rain came--in torrents, as it can only rain in the tropics--and Fernando was able to moisten his parched lips by sucking his drenched clothes.

Wishing to get nearer to the poor fellow, in the hope that they might be

able to comfort him, at least with words, Harry and Jim Braid climbed the spur and moved along the ledge at the top of the precipice until they were immediately above the withered tree. There, lying down upon their faces, they cried out to him to be of good courage, reminding him that the dawn approached, that his brother would soon return.

Daybreak is the hour when Life is nearest Death. It was shortly before sunrise that Fernando himself gave up all hope, and called upon God to take charge of his departing soul. He said that he was quite ready to welcome Death; he desired nothing more than to have an end to his misery and suspense. And, even as the words left his lips, the figure of his brother was seen approaching along the ledge.

At the feet of Harry Urquhart, Cortes sank, exhausted. The object of his mission fulfilled, he lost consciousness and drifted into a faint.

With all dispatch they uncoiled the long, snake-like creeper. Passing one end over a jutting pinnacle of rock, they lowered the other towards Fernando. It was more than long enough to reach the place where he lay.

With great difficulty the poor fellow managed to untie his belt and make fast the end of the creeper around his waist. And then they had to wait a long time, until Cortes, who had recovered consciousness, was able to assist the two boys in hauling up the rope.

This was no easy matter, since they had neither a good foothold nor much space upon the terrace. But in the end they succeeded, and the rescued man lay panting on the ledge. He was immediately given water to drink; and when he had drunk, a smile slowly overspread his face, and he looked at the brother who had saved his life. But no word of gratitude ever passed his lips; his thanks--far more eloquent than words--were in his eyes. And the dark eyes of a half-caste are the most expressive and the most beautiful in the world.

CHAPTER XXXVI--The Twelfth Hour

Owing to the exhausted state of the two guides, the party could not set forth upon their return journey to the Caves of Zoroaster until the afternoon of the following day.

The powers of endurance of both men had been taxed to the utmost--the elder, by the terrible ordeal through which he had passed; the younger, by his almost superhuman efforts.

In spite of that, Harry Urquhart was all anxiety to be off. He had often pictured to himself the agony of suspense that all this time von Hardenberg was being called upon to bear. The boy wondered if the lamp which the Prussian had taken with him into the vault still burned. If so, it would shed its light upon the glittering treasure. If it had gone out, the Prussian was buried in unutterable and eternal darkness--eternal, since escape was beyond the bounds of possibility. That, combined with the fearful silence that reigned in the place, with hope dying in the prisoner's heart as the days rolled slowly by, was enough--as it seemed to Harry--to drive any man to madness. The boy found it impossible to forgive his cousin, who had acted so basely from the first; for all that, he was by no means heartless, and, in any case, it was his duty to save a human life from so terrible an end.

As soon as the guides professed themselves able to undertake the journey, they set off towards the caves. It took them more than two days to accomplish what the younger guide had done in under twelve hours, and thence, striking due south-west, they approached the caves from the opposite direction to that in which they had first entered Maziriland.

On this occasion they saw--though they did not come into actual contact with--several of the Maziri peasants who were working in the cultivated tracts of country that lay between the mountains and the bush. Maziriland was very sparsely populated--the race verging on extinction--and at least two-thirds of the

inhabitants were congregated in the chief town, where they carried on certain industries, their skill in which they had inherited from the ancients.

It approached the hour of daybreak when Harry Urquhart and his party reached the foot of the great flight of steps that led to the entrance to the caves, where stood the two carved giants. Harry had hurried forward, closely followed by Braid. The two guides brought up the rear.

In feverish excitement, three steps at a time, the boy dashed up the steps between the weird, fantastic statues, and was about to enter the cave when he remembered that he had no light, and that, since it was night, the place would be unutterably dark. He had retraced his steps some distance, with the object of getting some kind of torch, when he was met by Fernando at the head of the long flight of steps.

"A light!" he cried. "It is quite dark within."

Fernando had foreseen this, and in mid-valley had broken a branch from a cork-tree, which he had damped with rifle oil. This he now lighted and gave to Harry, who was the first to enter the cave.

Inside, everything was exactly as they had left it. It was manifest no one had visited the place since the tragedy of some days before. The body of the old man lay still at the foot of the altar. At the farthest end of the cave the granite wall remained as ever, immobile and formidable. Harry Urquhart, taking the Sunstone from his pocket, asked Jim to hold the torch, and himself went to the wheels and turned them until the characters that showed above the golden bar corresponded with those upon the Sunstone.

When he came to the ninth wheel he was so excited that his hand was shaking. And presently there came the sharp "clicking" sound that they had heard before, and then the granite rock began slowly to revolve.

The rock evidently turned upon a pivot. Its motion was like that of an enormous water-wheel, except that, instead of revolving vertically, it turned horizontally, the way of the sun. When the centre of the opening was immediately opposite the altar there came a second "click", and the rock remained quite still.

Harry Urquhart, in breathless haste, snatched the torch from the hands of his friend, and dashed like a madman to the entrance.

He pulled up in the nick of time, noticing that he stood at the top of an exceedingly steep and narrow flight of stairs. Had he gone on as impetuously as he had started, he would have pitched head foremost down the steps.

He began to descend more cautiously. The steps were slippery from the moisture that invaded the rock in which they had been cut.

He had not descended more than three steps before he was brought to an abrupt standstill. It was as if his heart ceased to beat. From far below--so far away as to be quite faint, though unmistakable--there came to his ears the report of a

single shot.

CHAPTER XXXVII--Too Late!

The boy hastened down the narrow steps with all the speed he could, Jim Braid following close upon his heels. The two guides had remained above. Even yet, both regarded the place with superstitious awe.

The steps led downward--as it seemed an interminable distance. At first they were straight; then they were spiral; then they were straight again and broader. At the bottom was the vault where, as rumour had it, the great sage himself lay buried, where was gathered together the treasure that had been given in offerings during his lifetime, thousands of years before.

At the foot of the steps, the two boys, side by side, stood spellbound. The sight that they beheld was at once tragic and marvellous.

The vault was a rectangular room about thirty feet long and twenty feet wide. Against the wall facing the steps was a huge stone that resembled a coffin, supported upon a pedestal, cylindrical in shape, and about six feet in height. The coffin and the pedestal on which it stood resembled in shape the letter T. At the foot of the pedestal was a large marble basin, in the centre of which a small jet of water played like a miniature fountain, uttering a never-ceasing bubbling noise that sounded strange in the silence of the vault.

The walls were of bare rock. On the ceiling was carved a number of fantastic figures, similar to those that stood on either side of the great stairway that led to the entrance of the caves. But the wonder of the vault was on the floor, the whole of which was covered inches deep in glittering, sparkling gems. There were sapphires, rubies, diamonds, opals, and pearls. The former worshippers of Zoroaster had called upon the treasure-houses of the ancient world to pay their tribute to the genius of the teacher. They had visited the pearl-fisheries of the East and the ruby-mines of Burma; they had brought gold from Ophir and emeralds from the land of Punt.

And in the midst of this dazzling treasure, half-buried in the gems he had ventured so much to gain, lay Captain von Hardenberg, who, dying by his own hand, had delivered up the life he had so abused.

Full length upon his face, upon this brilliant, jewel-bespangled carpet, was the man who had stolen the Sunstone, who had betrayed his country, and who, in his own turn, had been betrayed by the very ruffian he employed. A revolver, still smoking, was in his hand. Carl von Hardenberg had placed himself at last beyond the reach of human law.

It is easy to imagine the torment the man had suffered during the last days of his ill-spent life. The lamp which he had carried with him from the altar in the cave had long since burned out, and now stood upon the coffin of Zoroaster. The mental agony he endured must have driven him near to madness. The darkness, the utter hopelessness of his terrible situation, the fearful stillness--accentuated rather than broken by the never-ending bubbling of the fountain--had no doubt driven him to take his own life in savage desperation.

He had eaten all his food. He had had water in plenty to drink; but he had no doubt given up all hope of ever being rescued.

Both Harry and Jim uncovered their heads. They stood face to face with the still form of one who had always been their enemy, who had been the enemy of their country. Von Hardenberg stood now in the presence of his Maker.

They buried him at the foot of the great steps that led to the Caves of Zoroaster; and there Harry Urquhart--who had a little thumb-nail Prayer Book in his pocket--read the funeral service over the grave, whilst Jim Braid and the two guides, who had served them so faithfully throughout these long adventurous weeks, stood by in silent reverence.

There was now nothing they could do but retrace their steps to the Cameroons. They could not hope to take all the treasure with them, since they had no means of carrying it over the mountains and through the density of the bush. They had travelled thus far to see justice done, to prevent infinite wealth from falling into the hands of the enemies of England; and in this enterprise they had been successful--that much in itself was a reward. None the less, there was no reason why they should not take with them as many jewels as they could carry, and accordingly, selecting many of the largest and most valuable gems, they filled their haversacks and pockets.

And then, ascending the stairs and using the Sunstone as a key, Harry closed the vault so that no one--not even the Maziris themselves--could open it. And there was something almost sacred--or at least awe-inspiring--in the deed. For centuries the Shrine of Zoroaster had remained unmolested. Except the successive guardians of the cave, no human being had ever entered the vault and beheld the glittering treasure. In bygone times these priceless jewels had been delivered up in tribute to one of the world's greatest teachers; and now, in one sense, they were like flowers upon a grave. It was well that the greater part of the treasure should remain where it had lain throughout the ages; there was wealth enough for them

in what they were able to carry with them.

With the return journey to the coast we are not concerned. The party accomplished the march in fairly easy stages; and travelling southward, for two excellent reasons, was a far more simple affair than advancing towards the north: for, firstly, they were able to utilize the rivers that flowed down from the mountains; and, secondly, the whole country was now in possession of the British troops. The German Cameroons was no more.

CHAPTER XXXVIII--Conclusion

Exactly two months after the arrival of our adventurers at Dualla, Jim Braid, cap in hand, approached his father's cottage.

It was about eight o'clock at night, and quite dark. He had come from London that afternoon, and had walked from the station. Harry, who had travelled with him, had been met by Mr. Langton's dog-cart. But Jim preferred to walk; he desired time to brace himself for the interview which was to take place between himself and the father who had treated him with such blind and harsh injustice.

The cottage windows were illumined. Softly he opened the door and looked in. His mother was seated by the fire.

A moment later her arms were around his neck. With tears in her voice she recalled the day when Jim had come to wish her good-bye. He was then an outcast, one who was wrongly and falsely accused, who had been turned loose in the world to roam the highways like a common tramp; and since that day his mother had never doubted his innocence for a moment.

The head-gamekeeper was one of the old school of parents. In his eyes, no less than in the eyes of Mr. Langton, the evidence against his son had been crushing.

As young Braid held his mother in his arms, the door was opened, and John Braid, the gamekeeper, dressed in corduroys, entered. When he saw his son he lowered his head, after the manner of one ashamed.

"My boy," said he, "I did you a great wrong. I ask your forgiveness, as indeed I ask God's."

Jim found it difficult to speak.

"The evidence was all against me," he stammered.

"I know it was," said the gamekeeper; "but I might have known that my son would never have done such a thing. How was I to guess?" he added, throwing out his hands. "I knew nothing of this Sunstone, nor of German knavery. I knew nothing of that. All I was told was that twenty pounds had been stolen, and--as I have said--the evidence was against you, my lad, and I believed you guilty. I repeat, I should have known better."

"Father," said Jim, holding out his hand, "don't let's talk of it any more. On my part it's all forgotten, and there's nothing to forgive."

"God bless you, boy!" said John, lifting a hand to his black beard to hide the emotion he was unable to control.

"There's something else," said he, after a pause; "I'm getting old."

"You're not sixty yet!" cried his wife.

"That's too old for a head-gamekeeper," answered Braid, thrusting his thumbs into the armholes of his moleskin waistcoat. "A keeper should be a young man and an active one. Lately I've had rheumatism, and I'm not up to the night work. I told Mr. Langton this morning that I didn't think I was fit to carry on the work, and he's given me a pension, though I never asked for it nor thought of it."

"You've given up your work!" exclaimed his wife. "You're no longer head-keeper at Friar's Court!"

"No," said the man. "I'm not."

"Who's got the place?" she asked.

Braid made a motion of his hand towards his son.

"Jim," said he--and smiled.

There followed a silence, during which there came a sharp knock upon the door, John Braid went to the door and opened it, and there entered Mr. Langton, followed by Harry.

The Judge held out his hand to Jim.

"I've come to ask your pardon," said he. "We did you a great injury. Harry has told me the whole story. He has told me of how he found you in London, and of the terrible act you were about to commit when he saved you at the eleventh hour."

Jim had forgotten that fearful moment on the Hungerford Bridge. He now lowered his face to conceal his shame.

"I had forgotten that," he murmured in an undertone, as if to himself.

"Do not think I blame you, my poor boy," said Mr. Langton. "I blame only myself for having driven you to such a pass. You have not yet told me that you

forgive me, and I have come here chiefly for that."

Jim stammered out a few half-coherent words, implying more by the tones of his voice than by anything else that everything was forgotten.

"And you have heard," Mr. Langton added, "that you are to be head-keeper here?"

"If you please, sir," said Jim, "I think my father can carry on till after the war. I was thinking I should enlist."

Mr. Langton again held out his hand, which young Braid took.

"I was expecting that," said he. "I promise to keep the place open for you, and to do all I can to help."

A few moments afterwards, Mr. Langton and his nephew went out. Before a roaring fire in the Judge's study they seated themselves in comfortable arm-chairs, and the Judge drew the Sunstone from his pocket.

"I shall give it to the British Museum," said he. "I have no wish to keep it any longer. I cannot look at it without realizing the terrible tragedies that this small piece of jade has brought about."

He was silent a while, playing with the Sunstone in his hand.

"Your Arab," said he very quietly, "the Sheikh Bayram, done to death; wretched, misguided Hardenberg buried alive in that dark and lonely vault; and all the miles you traversed, all the adventures you passed through, and the hardships you endured! It's not worth it!" said he, with a sigh. "Let the treasure lie where it is."

For all his words, the subject seemed to fascinate him; for, after a pause, he went back to it again.

"By my calculations," said he, "this stone is from six to eight thousand years old. I have known it for not quite ten years, and during that time it has brought about the death of, at least, five men. If it could only speak," said he, "of what tragedies could it tell--tragedies of the ancient world, of the long-forgotten past?"

With another sigh he got to his feet and stirred the fire into a blaze.

"And now," said he, "though you have already served your country better than anyone else will ever know, we can see what can be done in the way of getting you a commission. In regard to a regiment, have you any particular choice?"

"Yes," said Harry at once, for he had already arranged the matter to his satisfaction; "the Wessex Fusiliers."

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